

CHOICE OF PROFESSION DURING THE PANDEMIC: TRAJECTORIES OF ADOLESCENTS IN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

We aim to understand and discuss, based on Historical-Cultural Psychology, aspects involved in the trajectories of choosing a profession of adolescents from public and private schools in Uberlândia - MG during the COVID-19 pandemic. Between 2020 and 2021, we virtually carried out a qualitative, longitudinal survey with nine high school students, with four stages: filling out a questionnaire via Google Forms; first semi-structured interview; second semi-structured interview; and group practice. Using meaning cores, we analyzed the information and built four axes: Intended courses – between interests and concrete information; The school and the (un)preparation for entry into Higher Education; The family – source of support and/or pressure; Future plans and the centrality of admission to Higher Education. Thus, we emphasize: the insufficiency, mainly, of public schools to enable a process of conscious professional choice; and the role of the institution and school psychologists in providing Professional Guidance that helps in this decision.

Keywords: High school students; historic-cultural psychology; occupational choice; vocational guidance; school psychology.

Escoja de la profesión durante a pandemia: trayectorias de adolescentes de escuelas públicas y privadas

RESUMEN

El objetivo es comprender y discutir, a partir de la Psicología Histórico-Cultural, aspectos involucrados en las trayectorias de escoja de profesión de adolescentes de escuelas públicas y privadas de Uberlândia - MG durante la pandemia de COVID-19. Entre 2020 y 2021, realizamos, virtualmente, una investigación cualitativa, longitudinal, con nueve estudiantes de la Enseñanza secundaria, con cuatro etapas: relleno de cuestionario vía Google Forms; primera entrevista semiestructurada; segunda entrevista semiestructurada; y práctica grupal. Utilizando núcleos de significación, analizamos las informaciones y construimos cuatro ejes: Cursos pretendidos – entre los intereses y las informaciones concretas; La escuela y la (des)preparación para el ingreso en la Enseñanza Universitaria; La familia – fuente de soporte y/o de presiones; Planes futuros y la centralidad del ingreso en la Enseñanza Universitaria. Así, subrayamos: la insuficiencia, principalmente, de las escuelas públicas de posibilitar un proceso de escoja profesional consciente; y el papel de la institución y de psicólogos escolares en proporcionar Orientación Profesional que auxilie en esa decisión.

Palabras clave: estudiantes de enseñanza secundaria; psicología histórico-cultural; escogimiento profesional; orientación vocacional; psicología escolar

Escolha da profissão durante a pandemia: trajetórias de adolescentes de escolas públicas e privadas

RESUMO

Objetivamos compreender e discutir, a partir da Psicologia Histórico-Cultural, aspectos envolvidos nas trajetórias de escolha de profissão de adolescentes de escolas públicas e privadas de Uberlândia-MG durante a pandemia de COVID-19. Entre 2020 e 2021, realizamos, virtualmente, uma pesquisa qualitativa, longitudinal, com nove estudantes do Ensino

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Médio, com quatro etapas: preenchimento de questionário via *Google Forms*; primeira entrevista semiestruturada; segunda entrevista semiestruturada e prática grupal. Utilizando núcleos de significação, analisamos as informações e construímos quatro eixos: Cursos pretendidos – entre os interesses e as informações concretas; A escola e a (des) preparação para o ingresso no Ensino Superior; A família – fonte de suporte e/ou de pressões, Planos futuros e a centralidade do ingresso no Ensino Superior. Assim, ressaltamos a insuficiência, principalmente, das escolas públicas de possibilitar um processo de escolha profissional consciente e o papel da instituição e de psicólogos escolares em proporcionar Orientação Profissional que auxilie nessa decisão.

Palavras-chave: estudantes de ensino médio; psicologia histórico-cultural; escolha profissional; orientação vocacional; psicologia escolar

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has had repercussions around the world, influencing people's lives and established relations. The measures adopted to prevent and contain the disease have had an impact, and they are still leaving their mark. In Brazil, the educational field has been greatly affected, mainly due to the imposition of the Emergency Remote Education (ERE) modality due to the suspension of in-person classes for a long period of 2020 and half of 2021. This scenario has accentuated the weakening of education and the spread of decontextualized and meaningless pedagogical practices for students¹ (Vital & Urt, 2021). Thus, we, researchers involved in actions and investigations in the area of education, will present the report of part of the research² we conducted guided by the question: What aspects are involved in the career choice trajectories of adolescents from public and private schools in Uberlândia - MG during the COVID-19 pandemic?

We adopted Historical-Cultural Psychology (HCP) as our theoretical framework, which, based on Karl Marx's historical-dialectical materialism, understands that the constitution of the human being occurs through the relations of reciprocity that he/she establishes with others around him/her and with the cultural, economic and social context, while also constituting and transforming this world. In this sense, development is characterized by the continuous process of historically situated self-movement, in which the differentiation of one stage from the previous ones occurs through the constant emergence of new aspects (Leontiev, 2004; Vygotsky, 2006).

Therefore, we understand that adolescence is a historically, culturally and socially structured

¹ In the Portuguese text: Throughout the text, as a political act and a way of including one of the participants who identifies as a non-binary person (Sally), we will use neutral language, although it is not used in the works cited here. For more information about neutral language, we suggest consulting: Cassiano, O. (2019). Guide to "Linguagem Neutra" (PT-BR). Medium. <https://medium.com/guia-para-linguagem-neutra-pt-br/guia-para-linguagem-neutra-pt-br-f6d88311f92b>

² The qualitative research reported here is part of the project "Impactos do Isolamento Social na maneira de ser e viver a adolescência". This was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Federal University of Uberlândia (CAAE number: 34590820.7.0000.5152).

phenomenon and, therefore, goes beyond a period of puberty and an age range (from 12 to 18 years old). Thus, in order to understand the constitution of the adolescent in this current context, it is important to grasp some aspects. First, the systems that constitute and organize the capitalist society, which is controversial, individualistic, unequal, and violent, especially in Brazil. It is also necessary to turn our attention to the roles and meanings attributed to adolescence, which sometimes reflect a pejorative and stereotypical perspective of this stage and influence the relationships established by and with adolescents (Leal & Facci, 2014; Leal, Facci & Anjos, 2021; Souza, Puentes & Silva, 2017).

There are distinct, contextualized, and unique ways of experiencing adolescence, which differ according to gender, ethnicity, social class, and environment (Souza et al., 2017). In addition to considering the concrete conditions involved in adolescence, it is important to pay attention to the meanings and senses attributed by individuals to a phenomenon. As Leontiev (2021, p. 167) states:

Meanings lead a double life. They are produced by society and have their history in the development of language, in forms of social consciousness... They also have another life, completely hidden, another movement: their functioning in the processes of activity and consciousness of concrete individuals, although it is only through these processes that they can exist. In this second life, meanings become individualized and "subjectivized".

In this way, meanings are constructed socially, but they become individualized, through activity and consciousness, becoming personal meanings. Therefore, even though there are a series of shared aspects of a socio-historical nature, objects gain individual meanings, marked by the concrete conditions of the subject's life.

In addition, Vygotsky (2001) highlights the existence of a dynamic and dialectical relationship between learning and development, in which one provides conditions for the other to occur. Thus, we emphasize that school, education and schooling processes play an important role in enabling the mediation of cultural instruments and signs, since, through the figure of the mediator, who recognizes what the student can do without help (i.e., the Zone of Actual Development)

and acts on what he/she cannot do without help (i.e., in the Zone of Potential Development), they enable the teaching and appropriation of systematized and socially and historically constructed knowledge. In this way, it is possible for adolescents to develop Higher Psychological Functions, which, in turn, provide opportunities for learning (Vigotski, 2001).

Furthermore, with regard to the process of choosing a profession, which is the focus of this work, we emphasize the relevance of the development, especially, of two higher functions that become evident in adolescence: 1) thinking through concepts – that is, a complex form of thinking that allows the subject to perform abstractions, internalize and establish connections among ideas, develop awareness of oneself and the world, overcoming concrete information; and 2) creative imagination – which includes the creation of new elements, allowing the subject to project his/her professional and life future, leading life in a conscious manner (Leite & Della Fonte, 2021; Noguchi, Francisco & Anjos, 2021; Oliveira, Manganaro & Rodrigues, 2021; Vigotski, 2001, 2006).

Thus, as highlighted by Noguchi et al. (2021), from schooling, the formation of conceptual thinking and creative imagination, it becomes possible to establish a closer connection among work, knowledge and interests of the subject. Such articulation can compose the process of choosing the student’s profession, since he/she can begin to guide his/her actions in order to learn the knowledge that will be essential for his/her future professional performance.

Furthermore, choosing a profession is a complex, multi-determined and increasingly challenging task. Liberal ideals and social pressures to make the “right choice” increase insecurity, indecision and fear of failure and not achieving success in the professional field. In this sense, we understand that when choosing a profession, the adolescent does not only decide what to do, but mainly who to be and his/her way of life. The seriousness of this decision, the immutability and the unique nature of the chosen profession were aspects highlighted in the study by Barros da Costa and Carneiro Zuin (2020) carried out with adolescents and young people in situations of socioeconomic vulnerability.

For Bock (2018), professional choice results from a sociocultural process. In Brazil today, for students in private schools, this can occur at the end of Elementary School (ES) or High School (HS), when the adolescent is considered ready to enter the world of work and/or participate in selection processes for entry into technical courses or Higher Education (HE).

For adolescents in public schools, however, the moment is not so clear, that is, there is no clear milestone that indicates the time to think about the subject in a concrete way. And, sometimes, the process of choosing these students is permeated by feelings of helplessness and lack of care on the part of institutions (Medeiros,

Neto, Nascimento & da Costa, 2020). The urgency of physical survival overrides any reflection, as pointed out by research carried out by Barros da Costa and Carneiro Zuin (2020), highlighting social inequality in the Brazilian scenario.

Given the complexity and uniqueness of career paths that do not occur in isolation from the context, we highlight the pandemic that has provided an unprecedented scenario of many changes. Since it is a recent phenomenon, there is a lack of publications that discuss the perspective of High School students regarding career decisions during this period. Thus, this study aimed to understand and discuss, based on the PHC, the aspects involved in the career choice processes of adolescents from public and private schools in Uberlândia-MG during the COVID-19 pandemic.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This qualitative research included the participation of 9 adolescents between the ages of 15 and 18, who, in 2020, were studying high school in private and public schools in Uberlândia-MG. Table 1 shows the characteristics of the participants³:

This research, conducted remotely, is longitudinal, as it was divided into four stages carried out from September 2020 to September 2021. After approval by the Ethics Committee, we publicized the study via WhatsApp messages. And, given the student’s interest in participating, we contacted the guardian so that together they could learn more about the research, read and sign, respectively, the Assent Form (AF) and the Free and Informed Consent Form (FICF).

In the first stage of the research, in September 2020, we asked the adolescents to answer a questionnaire via Google Forms to obtain sociodemographic, family

³ We used fictitious names that were chosen by the adolescents themselves in order to preserve the confidentiality of the information. Furthermore, throughout the text, we took care not to present elements that could identify the participants.

Table 1 - *Characterization of the participants in 2020.*

Name	Age (years)	High School year	Type of school
Alice	16	2nd	Private
Carlos	16	1st	Public
Francisco	17	2nd	Private
José	16	2nd	Private
Luiz	17	3rd	Private
Mateus	17	2nd	Private
Max	17	3rd	Public
Sally	16	1st	Public
Violeta	15	1st	Public

Source: Authors of the research.

and school information, in order to plan the next stage more efficiently. And, after arranging a date, time and videoconferencing platform with the students, we conducted the second stage, the first individual semi-structured interview, in October 2020. The interviews, which lasted an average of 45 minutes, were conducted with the nine adolescents and were guided by a script with questions on six main topics: COVID-19 pandemic; routine; studies and school; relationships with friends; family life; and future prospects.

The third stage, the second individual semi-structured interview, conducted between May and June 2021 with six adolescents: Alice, Francisco, José, Luiz, Mateus, and Sally, lasted an average of 58 minutes. In order to conduct it, we changed the previous script and added some questions, including the topic: relation with oneself during the pandemic.

Finally, between July and September 2021⁴, we held the group practice meetings, the fourth stage, in which Francisco, José, Luiz, Mateus, and Sally participated. There were 9 weekly meetings, with an average duration of 1 hour and 42 minutes, addressing topics such as: Adolescence, Adaptation to Technology and Affective Relationships with Oneself and Others during the Pandemic; Narratives about Higher Education – processes of choice, entry and trajectories; Future perspectives – beyond Higher Education. The groups were led using dialogic instruments presented by us, the researchers, or by the adolescents. The group practices are, at the same time, interventions, processes of care and strengthening of life and spaces of power, transformation and dialogue that can, through the mediation of others, provide good encounters, the expansion of perspectives and the development of reflective, free, lively individuals, creators of themselves and capable of collectively changing reality (Pereira & Sawaiá, 2020).

The interviews and group practice were recorded in audio. Afterwards, we transcribed the recordings of the interviews. Thus, through the artisanal work carried out from reflective and creative interactions established between us and the participants, in which we read, analyzed and made changes to the transcripts, we transformed the experience (interviews/groups) into text. We emphasize that the analysis of the information

⁴ It is important to note that the implementation of the ERE was carried out in different ways between the public and private education systems, highlighting the inequalities that exist. In Uberlândia, Minas Gerais, at the beginning of the 2021 school year, private educational institutions attempted to resume in-person classes in a hybrid format, but this did not last long due to the increase in confirmed cases of COVID-19. In mid-2021, after the increase in vaccination rates in the aforementioned city, pressure for in-person classes to return intensified, mainly from private schools. Only the stage designated as group practice was carried out in the second half of 2021, and in some of the meetings, the students who were participating in in-person classes (José and Mateus) were on vacation.

from the group practice was carried out based on the notes contained in the researchers' field diaries and on the transcription of some excerpts from the meetings.

We analyzed the records constructed looking for the cores of meaning (Aguiar & Ozella, 2006). Thus, we signified and reflected, in an active way, seeking to understand the subjectivity, the senses, the values, the principles, the intentions and the convictions behind the narratives of the participants, problematizing the words used, the contradictions, intonations and the themes addressed (Aguiar & Ozella, 2006). Furthermore, in this text, we will mainly address information related to the process of choosing a profession. From this, we arrived at four thematic axes, which will be discussed below.

DESIRED COURSES – BETWEEN INTERESTS AND CONCRETE INFORMATION

The process of choosing a career is one of the main concerns of adolescents, so much so that, of the nine, eight spoke about the courses they wanted to take and, in some cases, about more than one possibility. Among the areas mentioned were: Agronomy, Architecture, Biology, Political Science, Social Sciences, Law, Aeronautical and Chemical Engineering, Physics and Psychology. The participants expressed that the articulation between two central pillars supported their choices: their interests and concrete information about the courses and possible areas of activity in the job market. Regarding this, José said: "We have **to balance these two things**. Think about both the **financial** aspect and the '**what I really like**' aspect." (our emphasis).

The first foundation is understood as something essential by all participants, since they sought to enroll in courses with which they identified. Based on childhood and/or adolescence experiences, in general, interests seemed to arise both from positive experiences with school subjects and their content, corroborating what was presented by Oliveira, Lima and Peretta (2020), and from other pleasurable activities carried out by adolescents. Here, it is important to emphasize that these desires were constructed throughout the students' lives, based on social, school and family influences. We will deepen the discussion on these last two sources of interference in the next axes of analysis.

Another relevant aspect that appeared, explicitly or implicitly, in the participants' narratives was how much the pandemic period allowed moments of self-knowledge and redefinition of their interests. Circumstances that, together with the lack of exchange with their peers and reference teachers, intensified the indecisions and doubts present in professional choices. Regarding this, Francisco said:

Before the quarantine, I wanted to study Law, but I completely changed my mind. I think this is normal for my age and healthy. Now, I want to study Social

Sciences. I didn't think about it overnight, because before, I was already thinking about studying Social Sciences after graduating in Law, but **now it has become my main focus.** (our emphasis).

As for concrete information about the courses and their possible areas of work in the job market, we noticed that the teenagers acquired this knowledge, from the most to the least used method, through: 1) generalist research carried out on the internet and in books about the desired degree; 2) observations and/or conversations with people in the field (such as family members, teachers and acquaintances) about the training and possibilities of working in the profession; 3) in-depth research on the course schedules; and 4) actions to support the professional choice offered by the school itself. In this regard, Mateus commented: “[The **school coordinator**] **provides very good assistance in choosing a course** and in looking at [and putting together] a study plan [to take the entrance exam and/or the *Exame Nacional do Ensino Médio* (ENEM)]”. (our emphasis)

Thus, in most cases, participants expressed that, initially, they obtained information from independent research based on their interests, something that ended up not offering a critical understanding of the courses and possibilities for work. On the contrary, it ended up feeding fantasies and illusions about the degree and the job market. Conversations with professionals in the desired areas, in turn, contributed significantly to their having a deeper understanding of the professional reality.

In this regard, we also noted that the school's participation in the process of informing and guiding about possible professions was expressed by only one participant. In this sense, we emphasize the role of the educational institution in enabling this knowledge and its critical reflection, providing conditions for the creative imagination of adolescents to develop and contribute to the planning of their life trajectories (Oliveira et al., 2021).

Furthermore, we understand that the group practice, despite not having the intention of offering Professional Guidance (PG), provided participants with self-knowledge and concrete information about degrees and professional realities, in a contextualized and reflective manner. Thus, we act in a manner consistent with what Oliveira et al. (2021) proposed as a PG process.

Furthermore, we emphasize, as highlighted by Cartaxo, Silva, Queiroz and da Costa (2022), the importance that, especially in times of pandemic, the process of professional choice be experienced by adolescents collectively, with peers and with the support of school team (including a psychology professional). Regarding the contribution of group practice to understanding the reality of higher education, Sally reflected: “Knowing [from the discussions held in the group today] that sometimes **we will arrive there [at graduation] scared and that it's okay, because there**

are other people like that, helps a little” (our emphasis).

SCHOOL AND THE LACK OF PREPARATION FOR ENTERING HIGHER EDUCATION

All participants understood school as an important space for transmitting knowledge, learning, preparing for life and building “a better future” (Carlos), even though this was harmed during the ERE modality. However, we noticed that, in the statements of students from private educational institutions, the role of school in qualifying for the selection processes to enter Higher Education was evident, as expressed by Luiz: “I think the main role of school is to **prepare us for the ENEM** and entrance exams.” (our emphasis). Although the fulfillment of this role sometimes has its limitations, as José pointed out:

My study routine is based largely on school books. But **I don't just stick to the demands of school**, because I know that **many of the [exam] content at UFU [Federal University of Uberlândia] or at universities in São Paulo go a little further.** So, I always study more. (our emphasis).

Often adopting a market-driven and neoliberal perspective, private schools value admission to HE, presenting it as the only path for adolescents and, at times, coercing them to follow it by offering classes, support desks and study plans, which weighs on the decisions of these participants. And this pressure comes from many sides, such as: from the school, from their peers and from teachers. Regarding this, Francisco, when criticizing the HS organizational model, said:

because it is the year to take the college entrance exam, all knowledge revolves around this and it becomes boring [...]. **When we want to ask, they [teachers] cut us off saying that it is not important, because it will not be included [in the college entrance exam, in ENEM].** [...] so, **I feel like I am being excreted by the school system [...]** that **we are being pushed to that place [the college entrance exam and HE].** (our emphasis).

Thus, private educational institutions are presented by adolescents as places that do not leave room for doubts about entering HE or about professional decisions. However, we believe that these questions could be expressed by the participants during the interviews and group practice. An example of this is Mateus' question about the school providing enough information to choose a profession:

The function of the school is, as I was told: **It shows you the path, and you have to follow it, right?** So, she gives you the subjects, everything, and then you study and then you see what you like. Sometimes, I think a little bit like **“How does this happen?”**. Because I have seen several things over the years and **I am still not sure which course to choose.** (our emphasis).

On the other hand, students from public schools did not seem to be as affected by influences and/or pressures from the school, colleagues and/or staff at the institution to enter HE. On the contrary, what happened, mainly during the pandemic, according to the participants themselves, was a precariousness of education and a lack of insufficient preparation for choosing the course and taking the tests (entrance exams and ENEM):

The inequality in access to education is very great.

I am in a better position than someone who does not have any conditions, such as internet access. But, I am in a much worse position than someone from a private school who has classes every day of the week. [...] **The ENEM is for the whole of Brazil and, with this inequality, many people will not have the opportunity to get into college, as they will be competing with people who had access to thousands of opportunities during the pandemic.** (Violeta, our emphasis).

Statements similar to Violeta's were found in studies such as that of Medeiros et al. (2020), before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, we observe that, although the functions of the school in preparing for professional choice and for entering higher education are recognized as important by most participants, the latter is the one that predominates in the statements of adolescents. And this role was manifested as something that was effective, even with its limitations, in the narratives of students from private schools, and as something that did not occur or happened insufficiently in the discourses of adolescents from the public education system. This highlights the socially structured inequalities in the educational scenario (Barros da Costa & Carneiro Zuin, 2020; Medeiros et al., 2020), which have intensified during the pandemic.

Furthermore, almost all participants said that due to the lack of face-to-face contact at school, they felt that socialization was being hindered, which is essential for establishing social maturity and interesting interpersonal communication in higher education institutions. José expressed concern: "Sometimes I think: 'Will I get there because of this isolation and **behave very differently from others, in a more childish way?**'" (our emphasis). Thus, we realized that by not experiencing school as a social space, adolescents felt deprived of important opportunities for development.

When addressing, directly or indirectly, the role of the school, its teachings and its staff in the trajectory of choosing a profession and entering HE, many adolescents expressed ambivalent feelings and sensations. Oscillating between unpreparedness, insecurity, tension, destabilization, indignation and tranquility, feeling supported and confident.

Furthermore, despite the differences found in the statements of students from private and public schools,

in general, HS appeared as a kind of springboard for HE; something that corroborates the literature (Krawczyk, 2011; Melo & Leonardo, 2019; Oliveira et al., 2020). Based on the narratives of the participants, we understand that, during the pandemic, educational institutions did not offer or provided insufficient information and conditions necessary to support professional choices made in a conscious and reflective way. Limiting the possibilities for adolescents to learn about their interests and the concrete realities of the courses and the job market and to develop their creative imagination.

FAMILY – SOURCE OF SUPPORT AND/OR PRESSURE

Of the total number of participants, six presented in their narratives, directly or indirectly, the important role of family expectations and desires in the process of choosing a career. In the statements of some adolescents, the family appeared as a source of pressure and demands that, at first, were seen as something bad and, later, were reinterpreted as concerns and demonstrations of affection, as we can see in the following excerpt:

My **father** has the habit of **always demanding that I study and pass the college entrance exam.** [...] **And before, I used to feel uncomfortable,** but now I don't feel that way anymore. **Now, I even think it's cool, because I see that he is concerned about my future, and I have learned to like and live with this demand from him.** And I support many of the things he tells me, about researching things. (Mateus, our emphasis).

These family demands and pressures, which are built in a given historical, cultural and social context, are often internalized by adolescents and taken as their own, generating a feeling of fear of not meeting the family's expectations, as highlighted by Cartaxo et al. (2022). Regarding this, José expressed:

Especially me, who has two parents in the education field, **I was always prepared. And I created this expectation [...] of entering university, right?** [...] So, it is a **pressure [to enter HE] that comes from both [the school and the family].** But it is also an **internal pressure.** It is a pressure [that comes] from myself, thinking about my future. So, it is also something that is mine. **But, it does not come naturally, it is a formed process.** [...] I always had the expectation since I was little of participating in university, of having an academic curriculum and everything else, so it is something internal too. (our emphasis).

Pressures were not always explicitly expressed in the participants' statements, and were portrayed as symbolic debts, that is, adolescents' retribution for the years of support (financial and emotional) provided by their families.

In addition, even though they were forced to enroll in HE, some participants said that their families supported their decision regarding the chosen course, generating a sense of well-being and confidence. Regarding this, Luiz stated: “I was lucky. **My parents** never gave me an opinion and **offered me support.**” (our emphasis). In other narratives, family members appeared as sources of identification and inspiration for choosing a profession, as Alice recounted: “Ever since I was little, **I saw my architect aunt work and I thought it was wonderful.** I was about 7 years old, but I think that, in a way, **I had already known that this was what I wanted to do.**” (our emphasis).

Participants also spoke about the direct or indirect influences of family on planning their career paths. In some speeches, this appeared through the wishes and expectations expressed by family members about the field of activity, jobs, and attitudes adopted by participants that would be best for a successful future. Francisco gave an example of this:

She [my grandmother] **doesn't agree with me studying Social Sciences** [...] she is respectful [of my choices], but she **doesn't accept it properly.** She **wants me to be successful.** She didn't tell me that, but I think that's basically it. Because she has always lived with important people, in the financial sense. [...] **she wants me to be someone important,** but I don't know if I'll be able to be in the sphere she wants. (our emphasis).

In other narratives, this influence of family on professional paths appeared more indirectly, through the participants' concern about leaving their family members and their homes. Regarding this, Sally expressed: “when I think about leaving home [when I enter HE], [I think] so early. And **leaving my mother here too [would be difficult]**” (our emphasis).

Furthermore, in the statements of many of the participants, the family also appeared to have an encouraging role, providing support (financial and emotional) and/or inspiration and identification. Something that corroborates the understandings of Cartaxo et al. (2022) and Oliveira et al. (2020), who state that the family and its meanings significantly influence decisions about profession and career and the future plans of adolescents. Thus, highlighting the importance of considering and problematizing the family environment during professional guidance (Cartaxo et al., 2022).

FUTURE PLANS AND THE CENTRALITY OF ENTERING HE

Many participants, when asked about the future, initially spoke about not knowing and/or not thinking much about it. These were strategies used to deal with the pandemic period of uncertainty, as expressed by Carlos: “**I didn't even think about the future, because,**

really, I'm focusing more on the now. The future, when it comes, I think about it. **Because, for me, the future depends on the now. So, I do my things in the now.**” (our emphasis).

However, based on the questions and reflections raised during the interviews and groups, some adolescents talked about their dreams, although most of them did not have very defined trajectories, such as: getting a driver's license, living alone, having a house or apartment, traveling, getting married, starting a family, having children, being happy, calm and close to the people they love. In addition, many students talked about their desire for the pandemic to end and for everyone to be well.

Despite these other broader plans, entering HE, completing their education and entering the job market were central to the narratives of eight participants. Regarding this, José said: “**The future, for me,** as a high school student, **is the entrance exam,** right? That's what I've been preparing for. For me, the future now is being able to study, get into a good university and start my life.” (our emphasis). Thus, entering college is mistakenly understood as the beginning of life, the opportunity for a person to have remarkable experiences and feel complete, fulfilled and happy (Oliveira et al., 2020), especially in the midst of the pandemic.

Some adolescents, although eager to enter HE, expressed concern about the possibility of completing their undergraduate studies remotely and ending up disappointed due to the teaching method, as Alice reported: “I think **my frustration would be: Ending up not liking the course if it continues online.** Precisely because I am tired of this model” (our emphasis). Thus, the participants expressed ambivalent feelings about the future, in addition to positive expectations regarding admission, they expressed fear of being frustrated and disappointed with the course, insecurity, anguish and anxiety. Something that is similar to that demonstrated by the students who participated in the study by Cartaxo et al. (2022); and lack of concern, confidence and hope.

Furthermore, we conclude that the perspective of possible futures, or the lack thereof, significantly influences the process of professional choice. And we understand that by providing, mainly during the group practice meetings, spaces for the participants to think about these plans, collectively, we contribute to self-knowledge and to the development of imagination, allowing them to outline life projects, even if at a very early stage, and to reflect on, for example, the possibilities of not liking the chosen course or part of its content and/or change training, keeping, as José said, an “open mind”.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This article aimed to understand and discuss, based on the HCP, the aspects involved in the career choice trajectories of adolescents from public and

private schools in Uberlândia-MG during the COVID-19 pandemic. The inequalities present in the experiences of students from private and public schools were highlighted. While the former complained about the guidance and pressure from the institution to enter HE, the latter suffered from the precariousness of education and, at times, from the lack of discussions about this decision at school. However, it was common to all the speeches how insufficient the school was, especially during the pandemic, in enabling the development of higher psychological functions important in the process of career choice, such as: creative imagination and conceptual thinking. Likewise, it has not offered spaces in which these decisions can be made critically and consciously. In view of this, we emphasize the importance of the presence of professionals in School Psychology, who have a critical foundation in conducting PG in schools, so that they can assist in the process of choosing a profession, especially in pandemic and post-pandemic times. And working, from a collective perspective, with everyone involved in this process: adolescents, family members, teachers and other members of the school community.

We understand that this work had limitations, such as: not covering in greater depth the perspective of students in public schools; and not including subjects who did not have access to technological devices and the internet. In view of this, we suggest that more studies on the subject be undertaken in order to overcome the limits of our research. However, this investigation reinforces the relevance of reflective discussion spaces in which it is possible for people, in a collective, conscious and critical way, to think about the trajectories of choosing a profession.

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Data availability

The study data set is not publicly available, as it contains personal interviewed information.

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