

Education as a Means of Social Mobility or as Formation? Instrumental Reason, Credentialism, And the Loss of the Formative Value of Knowledge

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ABSTRACT: This theoretical essay examines the instrumental view of education, understood as the tendency to conceive educational experience predominantly to external ends, such as employability, certification, and social mobility, rather than in terms of its intrinsic formative value. The aim is to analyze how this conception is historically and socially constituted, how it appears in contemporary educational practices, and what effects it produces on learning, curriculum, teaching, and student subjectivity. Methodologically, the study is a bibliographic and analytical-conceptual theoretical essay that articulates contributions from the philosophy of education, critical theory, and the sociology of education, without producing original empirical data. The discussion argues that reducing education to the logic of performance, credentials, and measurable return, reinforced by economic rationality, credentialism, and evaluative cultures, tends to empty the experience of learning of its formative, ethical, aesthetic, and civic meanings. At the same time, the essay recognizes the legitimacy of the practical and professional dimension of education, especially in contexts marked by inequality; therefore, the critique is directed not at students or families but at the structures that produce instrumentalization. Its contribution lies in integrating these theoretical references into a reading attentive to the Brazilian context, maintaining the tension between the structural and formative dimensions of education and subjecting the defense of usefulness itself to dialectical scrutiny. It concludes that overcoming educational utilitarianism does not mean denying the social usefulness of education, but reinscribing it within a broader conception of human formation, social justice, and democratic life.

KEYWORDS: Human formation; Instrumental reason; Credentialism; Curriculum; Formative value of knowledge.

I. INTRODUCTION

Few institutions carry as many expectations as the school and the university. They are expected to form citizens, qualify workers, reduce inequalities, cultivate sensitivity, and ensure that each new generation has the conditions to understand and transform the world. Beneath this plurality of purposes, however, a particular way of conceiving educational experience has been consolidated in recent decades: one that tends to subordinate education to a single criterion of value, namely, its usefulness for ends external to itself. Studying comes to be valued by the employment it promises, the diploma it grants, the income it anticipates, and the position it secures within social competition. In this logic, knowledge ceases to be experienced as formation and is converted into a resource, a requirement, or an investment.

This article takes this instrumental view of education as its object and proposes to examine it critically. The problem that guides the inquiry may be formulated as follows: in what ways does the instrumental conception of education compromise the intrinsic formative value of knowledge and educational experience, and what social, pedagogical, and political conditions sustain this reduction? The general objective is to analyze how such a conception is historically and socially constituted, how it manifests itself in contemporary practices related to learning, curriculum, teaching, assessment, and student subjectivity, and how it may be possible to reinscribe the undeniable social usefulness of education within a broader understanding of human formation.

The academic relevance of the theme derives from its centrality in contemporary debates on the purposes of education, in which the language of performance, competencies, and measurable results has occupied increasing space. Its educational relevance, in turn, is linked to the practical consequences of this language, which affect curriculum organization, teaching work, assessment

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policies, and the ways in which students relate to knowledge. Discussing the meaning of education is therefore not a merely speculative exercise, but a condition for making pedagogical and political choices with clarity.

It is important to delimit the scope of the argument. The aim is not to deny that education has relevant practical, professional, economic, and social effects, since it can expand opportunities, favor entry into the labor market, contribute to social mobility, and improve living conditions; these functions are by no means accessory. What is critically examined is the reduction of education to these outcomes, that is, the moment when knowledge ceases to be experienced as formation and begins to be treated exclusively as a currency of exchange, a bureaucratic requirement, or a calculation of return. Nor does the article seek a romantic or elitist defense of a supposedly pure education. In societies marked by inequality, labor instability, and precarization, it is understandable and legitimate that many subjects view study as a path to survival and upward mobility. For this reason, the analysis proposed here is structural, historical, pedagogical, and sociological, and it does not direct blame toward students, families, or workers, a point resumed below in the discussion of credentialism.

In addition to this introduction and the final considerations, the article is organized into seven sections. The second section describes the methodological approach. The third conceptually delimits the notions of utility and human formation. The fourth discusses instrumental reason and the conversion of education into a means to external ends. The fifth examines credentialism, employability, and the culture of performance. The sixth analyzes the effects of instrumental reduction on learning, curriculum, teaching, and subjectivity. The seventh recovers the intrinsic value of knowledge. The eighth outlines pedagogical and political pathways, without promising automatic solutions.

II. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This study is characterized as a theoretical essay of bibliographic and analytical-conceptual nature, rather than as a systematic review or empirical research. The essay is understood here as a mode of knowledge production that examines and tensions concepts, articulating authors around a problem with argumentative freedom, yet with rigor in the construction of inferences and fidelity to sources. The choice of this format derives from the nature of the object, which is less a datum to be measured than a historical and conceptual configuration to be critically interpreted.

The constitution of the theoretical corpus followed explicit criteria. First, reference works were selected that define and sustain the central concepts of the argument, namely instrumental reason, social reproduction and cultural capital, credentialism, human capital theory, the banking conception of education, performativity, and the functions of education. Second, recent contributions were incorporated, especially those concerned with educational neoliberalism, teaching work, and the contemporary Brazilian context. These contributions were identified according to their thematic adherence to the analytical axes of the study, rather than through systematic searching, consistently with the essayistic nature of the work. Publication data for each source were checked in academic databases and repositories, such as SciELO, Crossref, and Zenodo, as well as on the official webpages of journals. The inclusion criteria were adherence to the analytical axes, academic recognition of the sources, their status as peer-reviewed or academically consolidated works, and their verifiability. In keeping with these criteria and with the requirements of intellectual honesty, unverifiable references were discarded, and no data, statistics, or bibliographic identifiers were used when they could not be confirmed.

The analytical procedure was organized around thematic axes, developed in such a way as to place authors in dialogue and to make visible tensions, convergences, and limits. The analysis is structured around four theses, which guide the development of the argument and are revisited at the end. The first states that the instrumentalization of education does not derive primarily from individual choices, but from social, economic, and institutional rationalities. The second maintains that the usefulness of education is legitimate, but becomes problematic when it monopolizes the meaning of formation. The third observes that credentialism turns the diploma into a positional good, while performativity reorganizes teaching and learning around what is measurable. The fourth argues that overcoming utilitarianism requires pedagogical, political, and material conditions simultaneously, and not merely a change of mentality. Finally, the limits of a theoretical approach are acknowledged, especially insofar as it does not produce empirical evidence and privileges consolidated works complemented by recent analyses; these limits are revisited in the final considerations.

III. EDUCATION, UTILITY AND HUMAN FORMATION: CONCEPTUAL DELIMITATIONS

A critique of the instrumental view requires, first of all, a careful distinction between the useful and the utilitarian. To recognize that education is useful, that it produces effects and serves legitimate purposes, is different from asserting that its value is exhausted by those effects. The first proposition is trivially true; the second, which reduces education to an instrument subordinated to external purposes, is precisely what is problematized here. Educational utilitarianism, as the term is broadly used in this essay, does not correspond to classical Anglo-Saxon utilitarianism associated with Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, which is an ethical theory concerned with the maximization of well-being. Rather, it designates an instrumental rationality applied to education, for which expressions such as instrumental view, education as a means, and instrumentalization of knowledge are used throughout the text.

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The distinction organizing the argument is better captured by the long philosophical tradition that separates what is valuable in itself from what is valuable for the sake of something else. Already in Aristotle (2014), one finds a differentiation between goods sought as means to other ends and those chosen for their own sake; in a modern register, Kant (2007) distinguishes what has a price, and thus admits an equivalent, from what has dignity, and therefore admits no substitute. Transposed to education, this distinction supports the claim that knowledge possesses, in addition to a measurable exchange value, a formative value that cannot be reduced to a monetary equivalent, a point that structures the entire subsequent analysis.

The relationship between education and practical life is neither recent nor illegitimate in itself. Saviani (2007) recalls that work and education are specifically human activities and, in their origins, were fully identified with one another, since human beings learned to produce their existence in the very act of producing it. The later separation between intellectual formation and manual labor, between school as the place of leisure and the world of production, is the historical result of transformations in social relations, not a natural fact. This observation is decisive, because contemporary instrumentalization does not consist in linking education and practical life, but in subordinating the whole formative experience to a calculation of immediate economic utility.

The modern tradition of formation, condensed in the German notion of *Bildung*, maintains that education is also a process of self-constitution, the cultivation of reason, sensitivity, and judgment, and cannot be reduced to the acquisition of applicable skills. In a distinct register, Dewey (1952) rejects the idea that education is merely preparation for a remote future and conceives it as growth and the continuous reconstruction of experience. For Dewey, education is not an antechamber of life, but life itself in its formative dimension; it therefore has purpose in its own course and not only in a later result. This inversion is important for the argument because it shifts the axis from a future promise to the present experience of learning.

Arendt (2013), in turn, situates education in the relation between those who arrive in the world and the common world that precedes them. To educate, from this perspective, is to assume responsibility for a shared world and, at the same time, to prepare newcomers for the task of renewing it. Education thus articulates conservation and renewal, transmission and novelty, and cannot be reduced either to training for the market or to immediate political militancy. The value of educational experience, in this view, is linked to the insertion of the subject into a cultural heritage and a plural public world.

A useful contemporary formulation for mapping this plurality of purposes is Biesta's (2010) distinction among three functions of education: qualification, that is, preparation to do something in the world of work and social life; socialization, understood as insertion into cultures, traditions, and forms of life; and subjectification, which concerns the constitution of the subject as an autonomous being capable of thinking and acting for oneself. These functions may enter into synergy, but also into tension. The point of interest for this essay is that the instrumental view ultimately operates a colonization of the other functions by qualification, and even of qualification by a narrow version oriented exclusively toward measurable performance and economic return. Formation then ceases to mean the articulated processes of qualifying, socializing, and subjectifying, and begins to mean only enabling individuals for the market.

IV. INSTRUMENTAL REASON AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF EDUCATION INTO A MEANS TO EXTERNAL ENDS

The reduction of education to an instrument is not an isolated phenomenon, but the educational expression of a broader process marked by the predominance of instrumental rationality. Horkheimer (2015) distinguishes an objective, or substantive, reason concerned with ends and with the justice of purposes, from a subjective, or instrumental, reason focused solely on the adequacy of means, efficiency, and calculation. What he calls the eclipse of reason is precisely the predominance of this instrumental reason, indifferent to ultimate purposes and attentive only to operability. When this form of reason prevails, the question of what is worth pursuing gives way to the question of how to reach, more efficiently, ends taken as given.

Adorno and Horkheimer (1985) radicalize this diagnosis by showing that enlightened reason itself, which promised to emancipate human beings from myth and fear, tends to become an instrument of domination when it reduces everything to what is calculable and exchangeable. Rationality, which was supposed to liberate, begins to operate as a technique of control, and thought becomes subordinated to the logic of equivalence and yield. Transposed to education, this analysis illuminates the moment when teaching becomes a technique for producing measurable outcomes and knowledge comes to be valued by its exchange value rather than by its formative value. Under such a logic, the school tends to organize itself as a device of measurement and optimization.

At the economic level, human capital theory provided this rationality with an apparently neutral and technically sophisticated language. Schultz (1973) conceives education as an investment that increases individuals' productivity and income, so that studying comes to be interpreted as a rational decision to allocate resources with a view to future return. This formulation has analytical merits and describes real aspects of the relationship between schooling and income. However, when generalized as the dominant model for understanding education, it tends to reduce the act of learning to a calculation of profitability and the student to an agent who invests in oneself, a figure later associated by critical literature with the *homo oeconomicus*.

Before advancing the critique, it is necessary to do justice to the strength of the opposing argument, in order not to confront an impoverished version of it. The defense of the instrumental dimension of education is not devoid of reasons. There is consistent

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evidence that schooling is, on average, associated with higher income and better productive insertion, which sustains part of the human capital thesis. Credentials, in turn, perform a real informational function in labor markets marked by information asymmetry, signaling attributes that are difficult to observe directly. Cultures of assessment themselves may be defended as instruments of transparency and comparability and, in certain readings, as mechanisms for promoting equity by making visible performance inequalities that would otherwise remain hidden. Above all, for students from popular classes, the material return of education is not a secondary detail, but a concrete condition for improving life. A responsible critique of utilitarianism must incorporate these reasons rather than ignore them. The argument of this essay, therefore, is not that such functions are illegitimate, but that they become problematic when they are absolutized, becoming the sole criterion of value and covering over the other dimensions of formation.

The Brazilian critique of this absolutization found an influential formulation in Frigotto (2010). In analyzing the relationship between education and economic structure, the author shows that the supposed unproductiveness of the school is, from the standpoint of capital, ideologically productive, insofar as it naturalizes the subordination of formation to the demands of accumulation and shifts to the individual the responsibility for economic insertion. Human capital theory, in this reading, operates less as a neutral description than as a discourse that, when taken as the only measure, legitimizes the instrumentalization of education and obscures the structural determinants of inequality.

In a broader register, Dardot and Laval (2016) characterize neoliberalism not simply as an economic doctrine, but as a global rationality that extends the logic of competition and enterprise to all spheres of existence and fabricates an entrepreneurial subject of the self. This diagnosis has been revisited in recent debate, for example in the analysis of education as human capital and the subjectivation of the citizen as an enterprise of the self (Marinho, 2021). Applied to education, this rationality, as Laval (2019) argues in his analysis of what he calls school neoliberalism, converts education into a private good to be acquired and consumed, families into consumers of a service, and knowledge into a stock of competencies and human capital adjusted to market needs. At the same time, in his reading, international organizations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank contribute to disseminating parameters for adapting national systems to this logic, often under the appearance of modernization. It is important, however, to preserve the precision of the argument. Recognizing the economic functions of education is legitimate and necessary; what is criticized is the hypertrophy of economic rationality to the point at which it becomes the only criterion of value, absorbing and disqualifying the other dimensions of formation.

V. CREDENTIALISM, EMPLOYABILITY AND THE CULTURE OF PERFORMANCE

If instrumental rationality provides the framework, credentialism describes one of its most visible social effects. Collins (1979), in his historical sociology of education and stratification, argues that the expansion of schooling did not translate simply into greater social mobility, but fueled a process of credential inflation. As more people attain a given level of certification, that level loses its distinctive value, and competition shifts toward higher credentials, in a spiral in which diplomas function as positional currency in the dispute for positions. The professions, the author observes, also close themselves through credential requirements. In this dynamic, the diploma tends to matter more for its power of signaling and distinction than for the knowledge it supposedly certifies.

The sociology of Bourdieu and Passeron (2014) complements this picture by showing that the school, far from being a neutral institution, reproduces social inequalities through the unequal valuation of cultural capital and through the exercise of symbolic violence that presents itself as merit. The meritocratic promise, by postulating formal equality among students, makes the institution indifferent to the effects of the inequalities that it itself reproduces and legitimizes. It is thus possible to understand that the race for credentials is not a game among equals, and that its results largely reflect social positions of origin.

Added to this scenario is the discourse of employability, which transfers to the individual the responsibility for becoming attractive to the market, as if success or failure depended solely on personal choices and efforts. This displacement, consistent with the figure of the entrepreneurial subject of the self analyzed by Dardot and Laval (2016), tends to erase the structural conditions that determine opportunities and to convert collective problems into individual failures. By naturalizing precariousness, the language of employability requires from the student permanent adaptation and continuous investment in oneself.

Within institutions, this logic assumes the form of what Ball (2003) calls performativity, that is, a mode of regulation that governs through the establishment of targets, indicators, and assessments, requiring each professional to organize in response to these devices. The author describes the effects of this culture on the inner life of educators, who oscillate between the pursuit of success according to external criteria and the experience of inauthenticity, conflict, and resistance. He also observes how pressure for performance can produce fabrications, that is, representations designed to satisfy indicators more than to express the reality of educational work. The culture of performance, rankings, and accountability installs in everyday school life a temporality of immediate result that tends to impoverish the relationship with knowledge.

In the Brazilian context, these processes are articulated with the expansion of schooling and higher education, the social valorization of the diploma, and the diffusion of large-scale assessments. Freitas (2012), in examining the action of the so-called corporate reformers of education, shows how the combination of accountability, meritocracy, and privatization, articulated with

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large-scale assessments, tends to leave aside essential dimensions of human formation. Recent studies on contemporary Brazilian education point in the same direction, emphasizing that pedagogical transformations and social inequalities are accompanied by a dispute over the redefinition of the role of the school (Paixao et al., 2026a). The massification of access, which is in itself an advance, coexists with credential inflation and with the frustration of the promise of mobility when the labor market does not absorb graduates under dignified conditions.

There is, therefore, a tension that the argument must sustain without ambiguity. In an unequal society, seeking the diploma as a path to upward mobility and survival is a rational response to concrete material conditions, not a moral failing of subjects. Thus, any critique of instrumentalization that ignores the urgencies of those who study in order to live better would risk cynicism. What this essay maintains is that this legitimate pursuit is itself produced and channeled by structures that reduce education to an instrument, and that these structures, not individuals, must be the focus of analysis.

VI. THE LOSS OF FORMATIVE MEANING: LEARNING, CURRICULUM, TEACHING AND SUBJECTIVITY

The predominance of instrumental logic first affects the very meaning of learning. Biesta (2010) calls attention to what he describes as an age of measurement, in which the question concerning the purpose of education tends to be answered only in terms of measurable learning outcomes. The author associates this displacement with a language of learning, designated by the expression learnification, in which emphasis falls on learning as an assessable process, to the detriment of the question of what, why, and with whom one learns. Within this frame, learning tends to be confused with fulfilling requirements, obtaining grades, and accumulating certificates, and the relation to knowledge is reduced to the satisfaction of demands.

This configuration updates, under new conditions, Freire's (2011) critique of the banking conception of education, in which the educator deposits content into learners treated as passive receptacles and knowledge is converted into an object to be transferred and stored. Against banking education, Freire proposes a problem-posing and dialogical education grounded in questioning and in the shared construction of knowledge. The instrumental relation to knowledge, which values the accumulation of information over its critical elaboration, has an evident affinity with banking logic. Consistently, Freire (1996) argues that teaching is not the transfer of knowledge, but the creation of possibilities for its production or construction, a thesis directly incompatible with the reduction of teaching to the efficient transmission of profitable content.

The curriculum is another territory in which instrumentalization becomes palpable. Apple (2006) demonstrates that curriculum is never neutral, since the selection of what counts as legitimate knowledge expresses power relations and decisions about what deserves to be taught. Under utilitarian logic, a hierarchy of knowledge tends to be consolidated in which contents without immediate economic return, especially in the humanities, the arts, and part of the sciences, are perceived as dispensable, superfluous, or secondary. The question that organizes the curriculum shifts from what is formative to what is measurable and immediately applicable, and entire disciplines come to have to justify their existence according to the criterion of return.

Teaching work, in turn, is profoundly affected. The performativity described by Ball (2003) tends to reduce the teacher to an executor of targets, subjecting teaching to work intensification, loss of autonomy, and weakening of formative dialogue, although the intensity of these effects varies according to institutional and national contexts. When teaching success is defined by external indicators, the time and energy that could be devoted to the pedagogical relationship are displaced toward the production of evidence of performance. Recent analyses of the Brazilian scenario describe, in this direction, a process of commodification of teaching and emptying of teacher agency, in which the teacher is tensioned between a productivist logic and a commitment to human formation (Paixao et al., 2026b). The result is a paradoxical deprofessionalization, in which more and more is demanded of teachers while their professional judgment and freedom to teach are restricted.

At the level of student subjectivity, the logic of immediate result tends to produce anxiety and to impoverish students' relationship with knowledge and with the proper time of learning. The student converted into a consumer of results is guided by grades, approval, and certification, and tends to experience as a waste of time whatever does not translate into measurable advantage. Such a configuration contradicts the very condition of formative experience, which requires duration, hesitation, and availability for what does not yield immediately. This configuration resonates with Han's (2015) diagnosis of the society of performance, in which the subject, converted into an entrepreneur of the self, submits to a self-exploitation that tends to produce exhaustion, anxiety, and psychic suffering. Adorno (1995), for his part, in discussing the purposes of education, warns against an education that limits itself to adaptation to what exists and abdicates its commitment to emancipation. When education merely adjusts subjects to the existing order and to its imperatives of performance, it renounces its critical and formative task and risks, in the limit, converting formation into conformity.

VII. THE INTRINSIC VALUE OF KNOWLEDGE: CULTURE, AUTONOMY, CITIZENSHIP AND DEMOCRATIC LIFE

Against the reduction of education to an instrument, it is necessary to make explicit what its intrinsic formative value consists of. This value is not opposed to usefulness, but exceeds it, because it concerns the experience of thinking, understanding, enjoying,

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and constituting oneself as a subject, an experience that possesses its own dignity even when it does not translate into immediate economic return. To affirm such a value is not to disregard the practical consequences of knowledge, but to refuse exchange value as its only criterion.

Nussbaum (2015) offers, in this respect, a forceful defense of the humanities. In analyzing what she describes as a silent crisis, the author argues that subordinating education to the logic of profit and economic growth tends to form useful machines rather than full citizens, and that democracy depends on the capacity, cultivated especially by the humanities and the arts, to think critically, to imagine the situation of the other, and to exercise citizenship attentive to the common world. Reducing education to what serves the gross domestic product means, for her, compromising the very conditions of democratic life.

This concern dialogues with Arendt (2013) and Dewey (1952). The former recalls that education is the point at which it is decided whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and prepare it for the renewal brought by those who arrive, which presupposes the initiation of young people into a cultural heritage and a plural public world. The latter conceives democracy and education as mutually implicated, and educational experience as communication, participation, and shared growth. In both authors, the value of education transcends individual utility and is linked to the maintenance and renewal of a common life.

Critical theory adds to this defense the category of emancipation. Adorno (1995) maintains that education should have autonomy as its purpose, the capacity of the subject to think and decide for oneself, condensed in the idea of *Mündigkeit*, and that this autonomy is also a condition of resistance to barbarism and reification. Formation, in this sense, is not a luxury, but a civilizational defense. Freire (1996), in his own key, articulates autonomy, critical consciousness, and reading the world, and conceives education as a practice of freedom through which knowledge becomes a means for the subject to become the author of his or her own history. In all these authors, the intrinsic value of education manifests itself in the constitution of subjects capable of understanding themselves, others, and the world, and of acting upon it.

It must be reiterated that affirming this value is not equivalent to defending a pure, contemplative education disconnected from material life, a position that would be not only naive but socially regressive. The argument is more precise: education has legitimate practical and professional implications, while also preserving a formative value that cannot be measured by immediate return. The error of the instrumental view lies not in recognizing the usefulness of education, but in making usefulness the sole criterion, so that everything that does not yield is considered dispensable.

VIII. BEYOND UTILITARIANISM: PEDAGOGICAL AND POLITICAL PATHWAYS

If the instrumental view is produced by social, economic, institutional, and political structures, then confronting it cannot be reduced to an appeal for students to change their mentality. Attributing the overcoming of utilitarianism to a simple individual conversion would reproduce the very individualism being criticized. The analyses of Frigotto (2010), Laval (2019), and Bourdieu and Passeron (2014) indicate that instrumentalization has structural roots, and that consistent responses must therefore articulate the pedagogical plane with public policies and material conditions.

At the level of the conception of formation, Saviani's (2007) tradition offers a fruitful horizon by proposing work as an educational principle and polytechnic education as the integration of science, labor, and culture. The point is to overcome the historical split between intellectual formation and preparation for work, between general culture and technical preparation, not by subordinating one to the other, but by articulating them. From this perspective, formation for work and human formation cease to be opposing terms and become moments of the same process, dissolving the false dilemma between usefulness and meaning.

At the level of pedagogical practice, the rejection of banking education in favor of a dialogical and problem-posing pedagogy, in the line of Freire (1996; 2011), points to teaching that values the knowledge and culture of learners and conceives knowledge as shared production, not as a deposit to be later charged. Reinstating the question concerning the purpose of education, as Biesta (2010) suggests, and refusing measurement as the only legitimate language, implies sustaining in an articulated manner the functions of qualification, socialization, and subjectification, rather than sacrificing the last two to the first.

At the curricular level, defending the presence of the humanities, the arts, the sciences, and general culture, as argued by Nussbaum (2015) and Apple (2006), does not mean treating them as ornaments, but recognizing them as conditions of formation and citizenship. At the level of teaching, opposing the pure performativity described by Ball (2003) presupposes valuing teachers, restoring their autonomy and time, and protecting the pedagogical relationship from full capture by indicators. At the policy level, it means avoiding the reduction of educational quality to a narrow set of indexes and reconstructing criteria capable of capturing formative dimensions that are not easily quantified.

There is, however, a condition without which these propositions become abstract discourse. In contexts of inequality, the defense of formative education must proceed together with the defense of dignified material conditions and public policies that guarantee access, permanence, and quality learning. Without this, affirming the intrinsic value of education to those who depend on the diploma to survive would rightly sound like the privilege of those whose material needs are already assured. Overcoming utilitarianism, therefore, does not mean abandoning the social usefulness of education, but reinscribing it within a broader conception of human

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formation, social justice, and democratic life, in which the legitimate aspiration to mobility is honored without reducing education to a mere instrument.

IX. CONCLUSION

This essay has sustained four articulated theses. The first, that the instrumentalization of education is less an effect of individual choices than of social, economic, and institutional rationalities, found support in the critique of instrumental reason and in the sociology of reproduction. The second, that the usefulness of education is legitimate but becomes problematic when it monopolizes the meaning of formation, organized the conceptual distinction between the useful and the utilitarian. The third, that credentialism turns the diploma into a positional good while performativity reorganizes teaching and learning around what is measurable, articulated the contributions of Collins, Bourdieu and Passeron, and Ball. The fourth, that overcoming utilitarianism requires pedagogical, political, and material conditions simultaneously, oriented the discussion of possible pathways.

The contribution that the essay seeks to offer lies less in the novelty of each isolated concept than in their articulation within an integrated reading that keeps in tension the macrostructural level of economic and institutional rationalities and the microformative level of subjects' relationship with knowledge, while calibrating this reading to the Brazilian context of educational expansion accompanied by inequality. Added to this procedure is the care to subject the defense of usefulness to a dialectical examination, recognizing its reasons before pointing out its limits, instead of discarding it beforehand. Concrete implications derive from this articulation. In curriculum, it is necessary to resist the disqualification of knowledge without immediate return and to ensure a place for the humanities, the arts, and the sciences as conditions of formation and citizenship. In teaching, it is necessary to protect teachers' autonomy and time in the face of capture by indicators. In assessment, it is necessary to broaden quality criteria beyond narrow indexes. In policy, it is necessary to articulate the defense of formative education with the guarantee of material conditions for access, permanence, and learning.

The limits of this study must be acknowledged. As a theoretical essay of bibliographic nature, it does not produce empirical evidence and sustains analytical and interpretive propositions. The corpus privileges consolidated works, complemented by recent analyses, which recommends caution regarding any claim to exhaust the current state of the debate. Future investigations could empirically examine, in specific contexts, the effects of assessment policies and curricular reforms, the experiences of students and teachers, and the concrete mediations between formation for work and human formation, in dialogue with contemporary phenomena such as the datafication and platformization of teaching.

Finally, tensions remain that no formula can immediately resolve, especially the tension between the legitimate aspiration to social mobility and the affirmation of the formative value of education, and between usefulness and meaning. There is, in this field, neither an automatic nor a simple solution. What can be responsibly sustained is the importance of keeping alive the question of the purpose of education and of resisting its reduction to an instrument, so that schools and universities may also remain places of formation, thought, and meaningful experience in the present, and not only passages toward a deferred future.

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