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Do students not want to study? The cultural environment as an explanatory hypothesis

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Abstract: The disinterest of adolescents in formal learning and their rejection of educational processes is a phenomenon that worries families and education professionals. In developing a case study, I collected data from an elementary school class in a public school that revealed the presence of such phenomena, such as a lack of commitment to school activities, inappropriate interruptions of classes, difficulty maintaining concentration, and complaints that classes were tiring and "boring." So why, apparently, do teenagers not want to study? Based on the data collected in this case study and using Vygotsky's theoretical contributions regarding the influence of the cultural environment on learning as an analytical foundation, this research aimed to analyze the described scenario in order to propose an explanatory hypothesis to the question "do students not want to study?" I found that the disengagement of adolescents from formal school learning was not the result of isolated elements, but of multiple interconnected factors that may include aspects of local culture (e.g., overvaluation of entertainment), low family participation in the educational process (e.g., low level of monitoring of adolescents' school activities and little encouragement for formal study), excessive use of smartphones and frequent access to social networks, and poor structural conditions of the school. Thus, the cultural environment discussed constitutes a mediation between adolescents and learning that takes on a negative character, as it operates as a cultural disincentive that reduces the willingness to learn.

Keywords: education; learning; disinterest in learning; cultural mediation; Vygotsky.

1 Introduction

Adolescents' lack of interest in the knowledge transmitted by schools is a phenomenon that has increasingly concerned families, educators, and public authorities. Such disinterest is often manifested through the devaluation of formal knowledge, a perceived lack of relevance in school content, difficulties in maintaining attention during classes, disciplinary problems, disrespect toward educational professionals, and the rejection of formal educational processes (Costa; Lima; Pinheiro, 2010).

The scenario described above closely resembles what I encountered during a supervised teaching internship in a ninth-grade science class at a state public school located in Ouro Branco, Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil. Throughout classroom observations and teaching activities, I observed low student engagement, limited participation in classroom discussions, difficulties maintaining concentration, a lack of



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commitment to school assignments, frequent classroom disruptions, disciplinary issues, and disrespect toward the teacher. Moreover, complaints that pedagogical activities were tiring and “boring” were commonplace. What factors might explain this situation? Why did these adolescents apparently not wish to study? What reasons help us understand such resistance to formal educational processes?

Although these questions may initially appear subjective, official educational indicators provide evidence of declining learning outcomes throughout the course of elementary education in the municipality of Ouro Branco. In 2023, for instance, the Basic Education Development Index (IDEB) reached 6.0 in the early years of elementary education but only 3.8 in the final years. During the same year, approval rates were 99.6% in the early years and 77.8% in the final years of elementary education (Fgv, 2026). Regarding Portuguese language and mathematics achievement, 55% of fifth-grade students demonstrated adequate levels of learning in Portuguese and 42% in mathematics. Among ninth-grade students, however, these figures dropped substantially to 20% and 13%, respectively (Qedu, 2026).

Addressing young people’s disengagement from learning and their rejection of formal educational processes, Costa, Lima, and Pinheiro (2010), employing a psychoanalytic framework, argued that school-related disinterest may be attributed primarily to the contemporary crisis of authority. According to these authors, one aspect of this crisis involves the weakening of family authority, while another concerns the delegitimization of knowledge transmitted by others, reflected in the diminishing relevance of teachers as authoritative figures through whom learners gain access to socially validated knowledge.

Nevertheless, adolescents’ disengagement from learning and their rejection of formal educational processes are multifaceted phenomena. Their causes may include family structure and involvement, individual characteristics, access to cultural products, and the broader sociocultural context in which schools and students are embedded (Martins; Rabatini, 2011; Ribeiro; Ciasca; Capelatto, 2016; Pereira; Zanon, 2021). Recognizing this complexity requires expanding the theoretical foundations used to analyze such phenomena. In this regard, Vygotsky’s theoretical contributions concerning the influence of the cultural environment on learning and human development provide a particularly valuable analytical framework.

According to Vygotsky's perspective, human learning and development result from interactions between individuals and their cultural environment. Biological beings learn and develop through interactions with other individuals and with culture itself. Consequently, contact with the social and cultural environment—historically constructed and socially mediated—shapes thought, learning, behavior, and development (Davis; Oliveira, 1994; Martins; Rabatini, 2011; Rosa; Goi, 2024).

Against the backdrop of the experiences and observations gathered during the internship described above, this study seeks to employ Vygotskian theoretical contributions to propose an explanatory hypothesis addressing the challenging question: “Do students not want to study?” In doing so, it aims to contribute to a broader understanding of the complex interrelationships involved in the learning processes of adolescents and young people within the context of Brazilian education.

2 Vygotsky: “Cultural environment”- human learning relations

As Davis and Oliveira (1994) state, Vygotsky advocated an interactionist understanding of human development. According to this understanding, the biological being interacts with the influences and circumstances of the environment in which it is embedded, so that its development, thought, and behavior are gradually shaped by a cultural environment that is historical and, in essence, social.

Thus, in Vygotsky's view, development occurs from the outside in, from the moment the individual internalizes their interactions with other individuals and with culture. Therefore, it is contact with the environment—that is, living with other people and their cultural influences, and the internalization of shared knowledge and social signs— that will cause the individual to develop psychologically and conceptually. However, in this process, developing human beings are not simply receptacles for the internalization of the culture of the environment in which they live, but appropriate it actively and in a particular way. (Davis; Oliveira, 1994; Rosa; Goi, 2024; Ferreira *et al.*, 2025).

According to the aforementioned theorist, human constitution in and through the cultural environment occurs through the mediation of signs and instruments that are socially developed within the cultural environment. For the author, the instrumental act mediated by signs introduces profound changes in human behavior, since the

symbolic element (the sign) intervenes between the person's response and the environmental stimulus, operating, therefore, as a second-order stimulus, as a cultural stimulus. In this context, mediation is understood as any element that intervenes in the relationship between the individual and the understanding of material reality, since this process does not occur in a direct relationship. It is also understood as an interposition that provokes transformations, embodies socially constructed intentionality, and promotes development (Martins; Rabatini, 2011; Melo *et al.*, 2020; Ferreira *et al.*, 2025).

Although, according to Vygotsky's understanding, the "environment" is an indispensable element for human development and learning, defining it clearly is an important task, given the multiplicity of understandings to which this term can refer. Without knowing the "environment," it is highly unlikely that one can understand its effects or influences on development and learning, because, ultimately, this is equivalent to admitting that such understanding occurs randomly or in a totally subjective way (Pino, 2010).

So, what is the concept of "environment" that guides Vygotsky's thinking? For Pino (2010), it does not seem logical that Vygotsky adopted the same concept of "environment" that was dominant in the psychological works of his time, that is, the generic idea of environment as the set of external conditions in which the development of organisms occurs. Thus, the human cultural environment is not simply a natural niche that welcomes the child at birth, like a bird's nest that welcomes the eggs laid by the female and incubated by her while waiting for the future chicks to emerge. For Vygotsky, in addition to being biological, the environment is cultural, socially elaborated, and determined by historical conditions, varying from closer and more restricted factors to broader and more diverse ones (Pino, 2010; Martins; Rabatini, 2011).

Given this scenario, characterizing this environment, which is essentially cultural and encompasses both broad factors and those closest to the reality of the individuals being analyzed, seems to be an indispensable task. This does not mean considering that, for Vygotsky, cultural environment is synonymous with the immediate social "surroundings" or that it is composed of elements that can be precisely defined, even though it includes local and regional, particular and general elements. It is not,

therefore, what is immediately around individuals in a particularized and spontaneous way, but the social universality that, to a greater or lesser degree, is present in the cultural mediations that constitute the life of each individual (Pino, 2010; Martins; Rabatini, 2011).

According to Vygotsky's historical-cultural perspective, culture, which materializes in cultural instruments and signs, is a product of historical laws, the praxis of human activity, and the objective conditions in which it occurs, being the substrate of the concrete conditions of human development. Thus, the individual is the producer of culture and at the same time the product of their internalizations; consequently, the processes of internalization and symbolic mediation determine the quality of their development (Martins; Rabatini, 2011).

Applying Vygotsky's thinking to the field of education, it can be inferred that an individual's learning cannot be dissociated from the historical, social, and cultural context in which they are embedded. For this theorist, in order to learn, develop knowledge, and construct oneself, human beings need to interact with other members of their species through mediations resulting from the instruments and signs present in the cultural environment (Santos *et al.*, 2021).

In this process, mediation can facilitate the learning experience (as in situations where someone learns something without necessarily going through the experience directly, through experiences with other people), but it can also represent an obstacle to learning and development (as in the case of deprivation of autonomy during learning). Thus, both the culture and the social processes of a given era to which a human being belongs influence not only their subjective constitution, but also mediate their way of thinking, their formation of concepts, learning, and development (Martins; Rabatini, 2011; Melo *et al.*, 2020).

According to this conception, for Vygotsky, the social is the determining factor in the intellectual development of human beings. For the theorist, being a social being, even if a child is intellectually talented, they will not fully develop their qualities outside of social relations, outside of the relationship with society, and without also using the forms and methods developed throughout the historical development of humanity (Nascimento, 2020).

In this context, for Vygotsky, understanding the relationship between culture and learning is fundamental to the educator and the educational process. For this theorist, when a child enters culture, they not only take something from it, nor are they merely enriched by what is outside of it. Culture itself profoundly reworks the natural composition of behavior, giving a completely new direction to the entire course of development (Martins; Rabatini, 2011).

3 Methodology: supervised internship, data collection and analysis

This research takes the form of a qualitative case study, thus having as its central proposal the study of dimensions of reality that are not reducible to quantitative explanations. Therefore, it can be useful for understanding phenomena composed of variables that cannot be measured and described with precision (Melo *et al.*, 2020).

The main source of qualitative data for this research was a supervised internship with a workload of 150 hours, carried out in the first semester of 2025 in the Science class, in a 9th-grade class at the Manoel Correia State School (EEMC - Escola Estadual Manoel Correia), located in the municipality of Ouro Branco, Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil. During the internship period, EEMC had approximately 300 students enrolled, offering regular elementary education, technical high school, and regular high school.

To characterize the internship, a field notebook was used to record the main events that occurred during the observed classes. Priority was given to recording the most relevant events that occurred during classes and that may have potential implications for adolescents' readiness to learn. Thus, I recorded the materials available for the classes, elements of the school's physical and material structure, methods and pedagogical aspects developed by the teacher during the classes, the students' attitudes, their statements and opinions regarding the pedagogical activities, their positions regarding school rules and its structural conditions, and the students' commitment and engagement in carrying out school activities.

The first observed fact that I would like to highlight is that the class being monitored was subject to the operating regime of what is called a "full-time school." According to Law No. 11,804, of June 13, 2024 (Rio Grande do Norte, 2024, Art. 2,

§2), "full-time is understood as the operating structure of a school that has an extended school day of at least 7 (seven) hours and at most 9 (nine) hours."

According to this model, students entered the school at 7:00 am and remained there until 5:00 pm, during which time they performed multiple activities, from theoretical classes, review and assessment activities carried out in the classroom, physical education classes in the school stadium, lunch, and rest in the period between shifts. Despite the extensive duration of the activities, I observed that there were no bathrooms suitable for bathing and hygiene for the students, nor were there any spaces conducive to rest in the period between shifts. Given these situations, I observed the students' discontent and dissatisfaction with this way of operating the school. Expressions of dissatisfaction were more frequent in the afternoon, since students were prohibited from leaving school to go home to shower and/or rest.

At the same time, in general, the observed classes followed the traditional expository scheme, namely: the teacher, equipped with a marker and whiteboard, transcribed the content for the students to rewrite in their notebooks. Only occasionally did the teacher ask the students to pick up textbooks from the administration, as it was not possible for the students to bring them into the classrooms or take them home due to the insufficient quantity of said teaching material. Despite this situation, the textbook was the main didactic guideline underpinning the approach to the content and learning objectives in the classroom.

Despite the predominance of the traditional approach, it is worth mentioning that a practical microscopy class was held, in which prepared microscope slides containing human blood samples were observed¹. This opportunity aroused much curiosity and attention among the students regarding blood composition, as they wanted to visually differentiate blood cells under the microscope. However, it is important to highlight the poor quality of the materials used in the practical class, since neither the microscopes nor the microscope slides were in the necessary condition to achieve the objective of the class.

In addition to the practical lesson, the second activity to be highlighted was the development of proposals and projects for the class's participation in the school's

¹ It was study material of the type "slide kit" for the study of histology.

annual science fair. Although this activity had been assigned to be done at home, with a deadline of one week, nothing concrete was presented by the students on the day of the discussion of the proposals. Given this absence, the teacher needed to adapt what had been planned for the class, encouraging them to develop the proposals in the classroom. As most of the students had not prepared or studied beforehand, they only made references to the themes that had been proposed the previous year, practically repeating what had been done.

From this activity, the most tangible result was the production of a booklet on the general theme of "environment," which was divided into the categories "energy," "food," "environment," and "renewable resources." In the booklet, students were to propose measures for environmental improvement that would be implemented through changes in the school environment itself. In general, the proposals only covered general aspects. Thus, for example, in the "energy" theme, the actions included measures such as "not leaving the lights on" or "saving water."

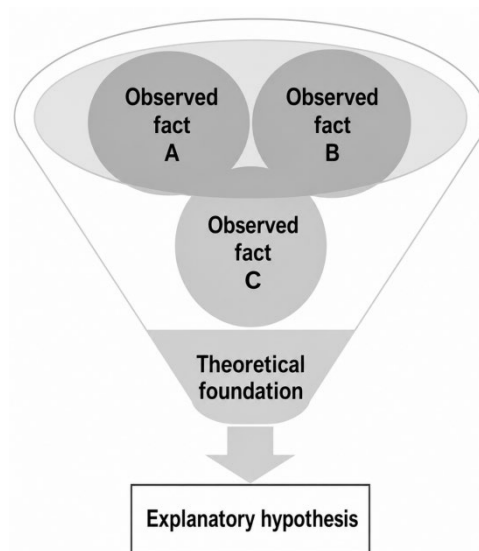
All the activities described showed low engagement and little student participation, with frequent unwarranted interruptions of classes, difficulty concentrating on the proposed activities, constant leaving the classroom, routine episodes of indiscipline, disrespect towards the teacher, and conversations outside of class. It was also very common for students to state that school activities were "boring," "time-consuming and tedious," and that they were "tired and lacked the energy" to do them, which was manifested by numerous instances where students simply slumped over their chairs and/or by the frequent use of smartphones during class. It should also be noted that interruptions, conversations during class, and disengagement from the proposed pedagogical activities consistently increased when festivities were taking place or in the days leading up to festive activities in the local community.

The use of "Chatgpt" to answer practical and evaluative exercises was also quite frequent, in addition to a low level of interest in reading the textbook, even when recommended and encouraged by the teacher. Furthermore, students showed resistance to participating in classes and learning, especially when the debates and scientific knowledge discussed went against their individual beliefs.

All the facts described in this case study constitute the data we collected throughout the research. They were analyzed in light of Vygotsky's theoretical

contributions regarding the influence of the cultural environment on learning. Thus, we sought to interpret, in light of the theoretical foundation, the interrelationships between the observed facts, aiming to understand what implications they may have on the disposition for learning and the engagement of learners in the formal educational processes advocated by the school. Figure 1 schematically represents the methodological steps applied.

Figure 1 – Schematic representation of the data analysis



Source: Lucena (2026)

4 Do students not want to study? The cultural environment as a hypothesis

I propose to address "environment/culture" as an explanatory hypothesis to answer the question posed by this article. Although one could argue about the subjectivity regarding the elements chosen to compose the explanatory category, as well as the approach given to each of them, it is important to highlight that, since this is a qualitative and exploratory case study, this text does not aim to offer definitive and unequivocal answers, but rather to propose subsidies for the elaboration of hypotheses and for reflection and understanding regarding the complex interrelationships present in the learning process of adolescents and young people in the context of Brazilian education. Therefore, the impossibility of generalizing the arguments and the explanation itself must be considered.

I considered two categories of factors, which I call "cultural" and "material," as elements that compose the explanatory hypothesis. In the "cultural" category, I include: a) factors that permeate society and local culture, specifically religiosity and the overvaluation of entertainment; b) the role of the family in the formal educational process and its relationship with adolescents' disengagement from learning; and c) the influence of technologies and social network on the disposition for learning. In turn, in the material category, I include the influence of deficiencies related to the implementation of the "full-time education" model and school routines on learning.

First, I will address religiosity and the overvaluation of entertainment as central elements of the local culture. Initially, it is important to highlight that the development of values, beliefs, lifestyles, and traditions in Ouro Branco-RN is intimately linked to the local socioeconomic development process, which had livestock farming and cotton cultivation a fundamental economic activities. Both were, from the beginning of the occupation and colonization process, allied to the imperatives of the Christian faith and the power of the Catholic Church, resulting in a cultural identity strongly influenced by the triad "cattle-cotton-Church" (Pereira Neto; Pereira, 2024).

Strong remnants of this sociocultural configuration process, which combines socioeconomic and religious forces, include a strong attachment to tradition and the predominance of the Catholic Church's influence throughout the municipality's social life. It is no coincidence that, according to the 2022 Census (Ibge, 2026), 88.2% of the population identifies as Roman Catholic. This sociocultural configuration is revealed in various Catholic religious celebrations, notably the Harvest Festival and the Patron Saint's Festival, which organize local religious and social life (Pereira Neto; Pereira, 2024; Santos, 2020).

In addition to the prominence of the Harvest and Patron Saint festivals, other festivities contribute to the local sociocultural repertoire, including Carnival, horseback riding, rodeos, the Saint John's Day celebrations at schools, patron saint festivals in rural communities, and other festivities and celebrations that fill the annual cultural calendar. These activities result, in addition to a constant remembrance of historically consolidated religious traditions and practices, in a varied festive repertoire that provides entertainment options throughout the year (Ouro Branco, 2025; Pereira Neto; Pereira, 2024).

For illustrative purposes, according to information published by the Communications Office of the Municipality of Ouro Branco-RN, the festivities and celebrations described below are part of the official cultural calendar for the year 2025 (Ouro Branco, 2025).

Table 1 - Festivities and celebrations that comprised the cultural calendar of the municipality of Ouro Branco-RN in the year 2025

Month	Festivities and celebrations
January and February	Carnival previews (held on Sundays of each week).
March	Carnival (March 1st to 4th).
April	Holy Week, April 13th to 20th.
May	Feast of Our Lady of Fatima, in the Timbaúba Community (May 8th to 18th).
June	51st Harvest Festival, June 1st to 8th.
July	Commemoration alluding to the installation of the first fair (July 16th).
August	Feast of Saint Roch, in the São Roque Community (August 7th to 17th).
September	City's Founding Anniversary (September 28th).
October	Feast of the Divine Holy Spirit, Patron Saint of the city (October 2nd to 12th).
November	Political Emancipation (November 21st), Feast of Our Lady of Graces (November 20th to 30th) and Evangelical Day (November 30th).
December	Saint Lucy's Festival, in the Lages/Poço community (December 4th to 13th), Christmas (December 25th), New Year's Eve (December 31st).

Source: Press Office of the Municipality of Ouro Branco-RN (2025)

According to the Culture Department of the Municipality of Ouro Branco-RN, this calendar was planned:

Based on manifestations that, for the most part, are timeless and reveal our valuable and unique traditions, which identify us as a people. The cultural manifestations that are part of our identity are not always recorded in formal documents, but are intangible practices that create bonds between the community and the visitors who appreciate them. They are the legacy of past generations and mark spaces and symbols that identify our people. These traditions impact not only the cultural field, but also the religious, social, economic and political fields (Ouro Branco, 2025, paragraph 1, single page).

Given this context, it is necessary to try to answer the following question: how can such a sociocultural configuration contribute to a lower investment by adolescents in formal learning and to a lack of interest in studying? My argument is that the cultural characteristics discussed (religiosity and the overvaluation of entertainment), while relevant values of the local society, overlap and compete to some extent with formal schooling in the development and learning process, especially in adolescence, when young people begin to have greater access to the cultural products of society.

When I refer to this overlap, I am not suggesting that the prevailing cultural values in the local society completely replace the role that formal schooling plays in

development and learning. However, because they are elements that are historically highly valued by the local culture, they end up, to some degree, limiting the potential for achieving the learning objectives resulting from formal schooling.

The Municipal Education Plan 2015-2025 reveals the influence that such values exert on local life and institutions, especially when it states that: "The culture of Ouro Branco has its roots linked to the Catholic faith. The Patron Saint of the municipality is the Biblical Dove of the Divine Holy Spirit. The festival in honor of the Patron Saint acts as a radiating center of the culture of this people who celebrate" (Ouro Branco, 2015, p. 11).

To illustrate how religiosity influences learning possibilities, it is worth mentioning, by way of illustration, the following episode observed during the internship: when addressing the thematic unit "life and evolution," specifically when discussing the main scientific hypotheses regarding the origin of life, the professor had great difficulty presenting and discussing this content due to a low tolerance for scientific debate, since individual beliefs, notably an excess of religiosity with a Christian bias, manifested themselves in the form of resistance, disdain, and disbelief in scientific knowledge, as well as in several inappropriate interruptions of the class, episodes of indiscipline, rejection of the content, and constant use of smartphones.

In line with the relevance of the facts described, it is important to consider that, for a long period in Brazilian history, the Church was the main agency for the moral and ideological formation of society. In this process, it was the Church, especially the Catholic Church, that was responsible for teaching social and behavioral norms and for shaping the cognitive structures through which individuals analyze, categorize, and interpret reality (Boschini; Silva, 2019). This power to shape worldviews is so powerful that even today, in many circumstances, it persists even after the formal education process, as noted by Nascimento and Almeida (2019) and Balbi and Falcão (2022).

Nascimento and Almeida (2019), for example, found that this type of mentality is recalcitrant and generates conflict. These authors, when evaluating the knowledge of scientific hypotheses regarding the origin of life by third-year high school students, found that religious conceptions about this phenomenon coexisted with and even overlapped scientific knowledge, even after this scientific subject had been addressed in the classroom during the school year.

Despite the existence of educational alternatives based on religious tolerance and the application of pedagogical models that are grounded in the possibility of constructive coexistence between scientific knowledge and religious views, it is fundamental to recognize the limitations of these proposals. The relevance of this statement is amplified when considering the influence of religious proselytism in schools, the growing political power of the so-called religious blocs (especially evangelical and Catholic) in current Brazilian society, and the consequences that such circumstances provoke in schools, which can range from curriculum changes to implications for academic freedom (Andrade; Teixeira, 2014; Santos; Fernandes, 2021).

In the case of my internship report, the argument is that the difficulties encountered in addressing scientific hypotheses concerning the origin of life are not the result of the direct influence of any religious proselytism or pedagogical censorship of the content for reasons of religious imposition, but rather of the capacity of local religiosity to create, from worldviews rooted in the local culture, ideas and conceptions of the world that hinder the teaching of this type of subject.

In turn, entertainment, being a central element of the local way of life, interferes with the functioning of school routines in two basic ways. Firstly, there is direct interference, since the school calendar is planned according to the needs of adapting to the cultural and festive calendar. However, it is the indirect interferences that contribute most to a lower disposition for learning, since the overemphasis on entertainment provided by the various cultural events and annual festivities results in a lower preference among students for school activities and an increasing allocation of extra-classroom time to festive events (to the detriment of schoolwork), as commonly recorded during the period of classroom observation.

When discussing these circumstances, Arruda (2013) considers that the increased access to what he called the "entertainment society" has implied a lesser centrality of the school, since it has been widely documented in the scientific literature that there is a decrease in the time dedicated to schoolwork as forms of entertainment multiply. In turn, Martins and Rabatini (2011) state that, although Vygotsky considers the transmission of historically produced cultural content necessary for the process of human development, he also understood that simply having access to different forms

of entertainment and expanding cultural options would not necessarily result in increased learning capacity, since culture can bring with it worldviews that do not prioritize the emancipation and critical dimension that should result from school education and learning.

Therefore, according to Martins and Rabatini (2011), Vygotsky's understanding is that culture must be appropriated through formal schooling so that, through planning and systematization of knowledge, it is possible to create new possibilities for overcoming limits imposed by culture itself, preparing individuals to be subjects and not subjugated by their conditions of existence.

The second factor comprising the explanatory hypothesis to be discussed is the role that the family plays in the educational process and its relationship with adolescents' disengagement from learning. The family element will be addressed from the consideration of a dual role it plays in the formal education process: the role of referential authority and that of participant in the adolescents' school life. Before presenting and discussing the arguments, I want to report, based on experiences from the supervised internship, what indications point to the low engagement of the family in the adolescents' school processes and routines.

Firstly, it is important to highlight the continued possession and use of smartphones by students in the classroom, even though this contradicts current legislation and school rules. In certain instances, when the teacher threatened to confiscate the devices from certain students, they threatened to "call their parents" if this happened, which may demonstrate the low level of regulation that families exert over the use of these devices by teenagers in the school environment. Secondly, it is worth highlighting that, as already mentioned in the initial part of the text, extracurricular activities were rarely carried out as stipulated by the teacher. Reinforcement exercises, reviews, or tasks, such as preparing proposals for the science fair, were defined as activities to be carried out outside of regular class hours. Thus, it was expected that students, with encouragement and family participation, would complete these activities, which rarely happened.

When evaluating similar situations and considering the progressive "disinvestment" of adolescents and young people in learning and knowledge, Costa; Lima, and Pinheiro (2010) point to the fact that, since modernity, there has been a

progressive emptying of the referential and authoritative power of the family, to the detriment of the increased power of external structures, such as the media, "psychologizing" discourses, and the school itself. According to these authors, responsibilities that were previously individual and decisions that were made within the family have been transferred to other instances of power.

These changes resulted from socioeconomic transformations that promoted industrialization at the expense of a rural economy, as well as a growing process of urbanization, whose interdependence resulted in profound changes in social relations. The family, for example, ceased to be a unit of production in which everyone worked under the authority of a head and acquired new configurations. This movement profoundly altered the way education is understood and practiced, so that, in contemporary society, the family is no longer solely responsible for the development of the education of children and adolescents (Varani; Silva, 2010).

Thus, as parents have to dedicate more and more time to work, children are "abandoned" earlier and for longer periods in schools, resulting in the transfer of a large part of the children's daytime custody, often also transferring educational rights and duties that should belong to the family to the school. This social and psychological movement has led to a distortion of social roles, resulting in a lack of commitment from the individual to their choices and to what constitutes them. Regarding learning issues, parents and children do not assume themselves as subjects of their own stories. Lost in the face of the modifications of these new power structures, invaded by imprecise psychological and pedagogical discourses, parents become incapable of fulfilling their role in their children's education, since many of them doubt their own capacity and authority (Costa; Lima, Pinheiro, 2010).

Despite this scenario, the scientific literature highlights the importance of family support in the educational process as an indispensable element for good school performance, as evidenced by Fernandes *et al.* (2018), when analyzing the relationship between the school performance of students in the final years of elementary school and their perception of social support from family, friends, and teachers. Thus, even if the school has a good curriculum, student learning tends to be more efficient if they receive stimuli and incentives from their family network and the community (Rosa; Magalhães; Silveira, 2024).

Beyond emotional factors, the literature shows that access to cultural resources (e.g., books, leisure, educational games) provided by the family and parental involvement in students' schoolwork result in better levels of educational development and learning in children and adolescents (Ribeiro; Ciasca; Capelatto, 2016; Pereira; Zanon, 2021). Ribeiro, Ciasca, and Capelatto (2016) found that the presence of books in the home and parental involvement in schoolwork are related to a significant improvement in writing, reading, and arithmetic performance. Based on the results, they concluded that family involvement in schoolwork and children who receive positive reinforcement at home have a greater chance of achieving satisfactory academic performance.

The third aspect comprising the proposed explanatory hypothesis is the influence of technologies and social network on the disposition for learning. In this section, I will discuss how the excessive use of electronic devices, internet access, and social network can negatively impact the disposition for learning. Initially, it is important to highlight that a striking and widely observed behavior during the internship was the constant use of smartphones by students during classes, without pedagogical or didactic purposes, a conduct prohibited by Law No. 15.100, of January 13, 2025 (Brazil, 2025). In addition to frequent access to social network during classes, the use of smartphones to utilize "artificial intelligence" tools (e.g., chatgpt) to answer exercises and evaluative activities was also very common, even though such actions were not permitted or recommended by the teacher.

Regarding internet use by teenagers in Brazil, data collected in 2025 by the Brazilian Internet Steering Committee (Cgibr) shows that 92% of the population aged 9 to 17 are internet users in the country, representing 24.6 million people. Mobile phones were identified as the primary access device for 96% of these users, followed by television (74%), computers (30%), and video game consoles (16%) (Cgibr, 2025).

According to the same research conducted in 2024, 88% of the Brazilian population aged 9 to 17 said they maintain profiles on digital platforms. Among 15 to 17 year olds, the proportion was 99%. Instagram is the most used platform by internet users aged 9 to 17 (36%), followed by YouTube (29%); then come TikTok (27%) and Facebook (2%) (Cgibr, 2023). Additionally, research published in 2023 revealed that Brazilians spent an average of 9 hours a day in front of smartphone and computer

screens (Nazar, 2023). Although there is no specific data on the daily internet and electronic device usage time of Brazilian teenagers, of the total respondents in a survey on internet use, 78% of teenagers aged 9 to 17 reported using their smartphones several times a day to access the internet, while 12% used it at least once a day (Cgibr, 2025).

According to Silva and Silva (2017) and Lima (2024), the excessive use of electronic devices and excessive internet access affect users' cognitive aspects, since the large volume of data received by the brain, in the form of text, images, and videos, results in the saturation of working memory, which produces cognitive overload and difficulties in activating long-term memory. This overload potentiates attention disorders (e.g., attention deficit), obsessive-compulsive disorders, increases the risk of anxiety, and language problems. Hyper-connectivity makes it difficult to maintain concentration on a given activity, which increases levels of distraction and immediacy (Silva; Silva, 2017).

Considering this reality, Mekler (2021) assessed how TikTok impacts concentration and the completion of school tasks in the classroom and found that the more time participants spent using TikTok daily, the more distracted they became, the less attention they paid in class, and the less able they were to complete academic tasks. Furthermore, I argue that, in addition to the negative consequences on the disposition for learning generated by attention deficit, difficulties in concentration, overload, and physical and cognitive fatigue (Silva; Silva, 2017; Mekler, 2021; Lima, 2024), hyper-connection to the virtual sphere produces a distancing and misunderstanding in relation to the dynamics and requirements of the non-virtual world, that is, a kind of alienation from reality, an illusion that everything is possible and that everything can be obtained quickly with minimal effort.

In addition to such negative interferences on learning, new communication models increasingly enable students to have the illusion of accessing knowledge without a teacher, to which they can ascend directly, which implies the discrediting of the school as a central place for the transmission of knowledge. It is increasingly thought that the knowledge sought today is more and more related to information that can be acquired without the mediation of traditional educational functions. Thus, increasingly, the knowledge valued by adolescents and young people cannot be found

in school, which has come to be seen as uninteresting and outdated. At the same time, their teachers know nothing about the novelties that motivate them, which delegitimizes their educational role (Costa; Lima, Pinheiro, 2010).

In light of what has been presented and discussed so far, it is worth highlighting that, according to Vygotsky's historical-cultural perspective, the processes of internalizing cultural elements determine the quality of individual development. Thus, the cultural environment, as a product of historical activities and the practical activity of human beings, provides the objective and concrete conditions that underpin learning and development (Martins; Rabatini, 2011). Therefore, regarding the case study I am analyzing, the low disposition for learning and the students' disengagement from the educational process are indications that the mediation operated by the elements of the cultural environment in which they are embedded takes the form of cultural disincentives to the acquisition of knowledge disseminated by the formal educational process.

Although cultural factors, such as family and sociocultural practices, are fundamental in the development and learning process, the school, through its pedagogical practices, material conditions, and school routines, also constitutes a relevant part of the problem we are discussing (Fernandes *et al.*, 2018; Varani; Silva, 2010). It is from this observation that I will address how the functioning of the "full-time education" model and how the routines developed at school can impact adolescents' readiness for learning.

Initially, it is necessary to clarify how the school operates under its "full-time education" model, as developed in the state schools of Rio Grande do Norte. First, according to Law No. 11,804, of June 13, 2024, which provides for the Full-Time Education Policy in the State Public Education Network of Rio Grande do Norte (Rio Grande do Norte, 2024, Art. 2, § 2), "full-time is understood as the operational structure of a school that has an extended school day of at least 7 (seven) hours and a maximum of 9 (nine) hours".

According to this operational model, students were required to be present at school during both the morning and afternoon shifts. However, as observed during the internship, the school lacked all the necessary physical structures for this routine, mainly because it did not have a bathroom with a shower or a designated rest area.

Thus, after meals, during the off-hours, students stayed in the school corridors, playing on tables located in the courtyard or the school's stadium. Therefore, the lack of these basic structures reduced the possibility of rest and hindered student hygiene, which, according to them, resulted in "tiredness and discouragement" in classes, especially in afternoon classes.

When specifically evaluating the implementation policy of "full-time education" in state schools in Rio Grande do Norte, Paiva and Batista (2020) found that, in order to offer full-time education in at least 50% of state-run public schools, so as to serve at least 25% of the state's basic education students, the State of Rio Grande do Norte has been converting dozens of regular schools into "full-time" schools since 2017. However, according to the authors, in many cases, the State of Rio Grande do Norte has not provided the necessary physical infrastructure nor adequately trained teachers to allow the full functioning of this "new" school model.

In addition to these deficiencies, I also observed that the school did not have a sufficient quantity of science textbooks for the two existing 9th-grade classes. When students needed to use the textbook in class, they had to retrieve them from a room in the school's administration office. Therefore, it was not possible for students to take the book home for study, nor for consultations outside of class time for each subject. Furthermore, the insufficient number of textbooks made school routines more tiring, because, for students to access the content, the teacher had to transcribe it onto the board or prepare handouts and slides that were distributed for them to print or read on their own smartphones.

The insufficient availability of textbooks was already reported, on average, by 60% of Brazilian school principals who responded to the Basic Education Assessment System (Saeb) questionnaire in 2017. In the same year, in Rio Grande do Norte, this number reached 70.4% of principals (Iede, 2019). Although this information is alarming, the outlook is that the situation will worsen in the coming years if the fiscal austerity policy and spending cuts implemented by the Federal Government continue to stifle the budget of the Ministry of Education, the entity responsible for managing the National Textbook Program (Santos, 2025; Lucca, 2025).

As reported by the news portal of the Instituto Conhecimento Liberta - ICL (2025):

The Ministry of Education, headed by Camilo Santana, did not purchase all the necessary textbooks for basic education in 2026. At least 52 million units were missing from the order, according to estimates from the publishing market. The situation is worse in the final years of elementary school (6th to 9th grade), for which only Portuguese and mathematics books were purchased, leaving aside the other subjects (Lucca, 2025, paragraph 2 n.p.).

According to the news portal G1, the Ministry of Education, through the National Fund for the Development of Education (FNDE), stated that it is a “challenging budgetary scenario, and that a phased purchasing strategy has been outlined, starting with Portuguese Language and Mathematics, but the purchase of books for other areas should be done later”. The statement also says that the material for EJA (Youth and Adult Education) is guaranteed, and that “strategies for High School will be defined subsequently” (Santos, 2025, paragraphs 6 and 7).

In addition to aspects related to the physical structure, according to the teacher's reports and as recorded through classroom observations, it was recommended that all pedagogical activities be carried out in the classroom, so that the times when the teacher could assign activities and exercises to be done at home should be minimal, with the entire teaching-learning process centralized in the classroom. Regarding this, it should be considered that studying at home fosters student protagonism and encourages individual initiative (so important for the educational process), since it shifts the centrality of the learning process away from the teacher and the classroom (Cunha *et al.*, 2024). Furthermore, a teaching-learning process centered exclusively on the teacher causes him to cease being a mediator and become practically the conductor and executor of the teaching-learning process, which can have negative impacts on the educational process and on the active role that students play in their learning.

I am by no means appealing to any individualistic or meritocratic ideology. On the contrary, it seems evident that the success of the school proposal also depends on the social construction of individuals, starting from an awareness of the responsibility that each of us has in relation to the construction of knowledge and learning, which constitutes one of the main motivating factors.

5 Final considerations

Initially, it is necessary to highlight that, since this is a qualitative and exploratory research based on a case study, the answer given to the question that titles this article should be taken as a possible working hypothesis, whose power of generalization to the broad field of Brazilian public education is limited. However, the reflections that this research proposes can be useful for reflecting on the conditions and complex interrelationships that operate in the learning process of adolescents and young people who experience Brazilian public education. At the same time, the argumentative propositions synthesized in the explanatory hypothesis can be useful for future research, potentially supporting new hypotheses and providing a foundation for understanding the learning process of adolescents and young people.

Having made these considerations, I argue that Vygotsky's theoretical contributions regarding the importance of the cultural environment on human development and learning allowed me to observe that the willingness to learn and the low engagement in the educational process manifested by the adolescents who made up the observed class are mediated and conditioned in a complex way by the historical, social, material, and cultural context in which they are embedded. What I mean is that the cultural environment factors we highlighted and the meager material conditions related to the functioning of the full-time school model applied to the observed school operate as a form of mediation that assumes a negative character for the understanding of educational reality by the adolescent students, since, very possibly, these elements constitute cultural and material disincentives that alter the willingness to learn and engagement with formal educational processes. This mediation results not only in a lower willingness to learn and low engagement in the educational process, but also in an obstacle to the intellectual development and emancipation that would be promoted by learning the formal knowledge advocated by the school.

Furthermore, it is important to consider that the lack of interest in studying and the disengagement of adolescents from school learning are specific to each context being evaluated, and that apathy towards classes, disinterest, demotivation, and disengagement of adolescents from formal school learning are not solely the result of isolated factors such as the individual characteristics of the students, the structure and participation of the family in the formal educational process, or the material and

pedagogical conditions offered by the school, but rather a broad set of characteristics that make up the cultural environment of the society in which the students are embedded. This results in the need for a careful analysis of various factors in each case studied.

In the case of this research, I argue that the low engagement and limited participation of adolescents in classes, and the consequent disinvestment in formal school learning, are the product of factors that interconnect in a complex way. Among these, I highlight the relevance of the following elements: a) an overvaluation of entertainment and excessive religiosity as central elements of the local culture, especially because they do not consider critical emancipation and the preparation of individuals to be subjects and not subjugated of their conditions of existence; b) low family participation in the formal education process, notably manifested by the possible transfer of their referential and authoritative responsibilities to the school, by the low level of monitoring of adolescents' school activities, and by the little encouragement of formal study and knowledge as necessary tools for the emancipation of individuals; c) the excessive use of smartphones, the internet, and social networks by adolescents, not only during classes but, most likely, throughout the day; d) the precarious operating conditions of the so-called "full-time school" at the school studied, mainly because the absence of bathrooms with showers prevents personal hygiene and the possibility of cooling off in a city located in a semi-arid climate region where temperatures of 40°C are common for several months of the year, as well as the lack of a place to rest between classes and the insufficient number of textbooks.

Given these arguments, it is fundamental to consider that overcoming scenarios like the one described in this account requires a broad set of actions that cannot be implemented solely by schools, but by all those responsible for the educational process. Therefore, it is important to consider that school success or failure cannot be attributed only to the school and that it is not enough to simply "invest" in the school, because without modifying the other factors that influence learning, the school, as one of the educational institutions, will have its role restricted.

Finally, it is important to warn of future harm to the learning of millions of adolescents and young people if the National Textbook Program (PNLD) continues to be the target of financial devaluation through so-called "spending cuts." It was

observed that, despite widespread internet access among adolescents, textbooks remain the most important reference material for research and studies for this class of students in basic education, since many sources of information on the internet are permeated with false information and because the way "artificial intelligence" tools are used may be merely a false shortcut to learning.

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