



THE ACADEMIC THESIS IN EDUCATION RESEARCH: CONCEPT, STRUCTURE, AND DEVELOPMENT

A Tese Acadêmica na Pesquisa em Educação: Conceito, Estrutura e Desenvolvimento

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ABSTRACT | Purpose: This article examines the academic thesis as both a scientific product and a process of knowledge production in Education. It clarifies its conceptual foundations, structural components, and epistemological orientation, emphasizing the thesis as a synthetic proposition grounded in the dialectical relationship between subject, object, and reality. **Methodology:** The study adopts a theoretical and conceptual design supported by classical and contemporary authors in epistemology, sociology, and education. The methodological approach combines conceptual analysis, problematization, and theoretical-systemic examination of the elements constituting a thesis. An applied conceptual example in Youth and Adult Education (EJA) illustrates how theme delimitation, object definition, and variable identification lead to the formulation of a coherent thesis. **Findings:** The findings indicate that a thesis is not a technical product derived from the accumulation of procedures or data, but a theoretically grounded response to a historically situated problem. The EJA example shows that understanding engagement and dropout requires articulating structural inequalities with school-level dynamics through a coherent theoretical-methodological framework. **Implications:** The study reinforces the need for doctoral training that promotes theoretical rigor, epistemological clarity, and critical creativity. It highlights that constructing a thesis requires confronting, refining, and expanding established theories to advance research in Education. **Originality/Value:** The article reframes the thesis as a critical and creative act of knowledge production. It offers conceptual foundations for understanding how theses are conceived and emphasizes the role of dialectical reasoning in producing theoretically consistent and socially relevant research.

KEYWORDS | Academic thesis; Epistemology; Critical pedagogy; Knowledge production; Youth and Adult Education.

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RESUMO | Objetivo: Este artigo examina a tese acadêmica como produto científico e processo de produção do conhecimento na Educação. Esclarece seus fundamentos conceituais, componentes estruturais e orientação epistemológica, enfatizando a tese como proposição sintética ancorada na relação dialética entre sujeito, objeto e realidade. **Metodologia:** O estudo adota um delineamento teórico e conceitual sustentado por autores clássicos e contemporâneos da epistemologia, sociologia e educação. A abordagem metodológica combina análise conceitual, problematização e exame teórico-sistêmico dos elementos constitutivos de uma tese. Um exemplo conceitual aplicado na Educação de Jovens e Adultos (EJA) ilustra como a delimitação do tema, a definição do objeto e a identificação das variáveis conduzem à formulação de uma tese coerente. **Resultados:** Os resultados indicam que uma tese não é um produto técnico derivado da acumulação de procedimentos ou dados, mas uma resposta teoricamente fundamentada a um problema historicamente situado. O exemplo da EJA mostra que compreender engajamento e evasão exige articular desigualdades estruturais às dinâmicas escolares por meio de um arcabouço teórico-metodológico consistente. **Implicações:** O estudo reforça a necessidade de uma formação doutoral que promova rigor teórico, clareza epistemológica e criatividade crítica. Destaca que a elaboração da tese exige confrontar, refinar e expandir teorias estabelecidas para avançar a pesquisa em Educação. **Originalidade/Valor:** O artigo reconceitua a tese como ato crítico e criativo de produção do conhecimento. Oferece bases conceituais para compreender a formulação da tese e destaca o papel do pensamento dialético na produção de pesquisas teoricamente consistentes e socialmente relevantes.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE | Tese acadêmica; Epistemologia; Pedagogia crítica; Produção do conhecimento; Educação de Jovens e Adultos.

1 INTRODUCTION

In the academic sphere, the doctoral thesis represents the pinnacle of intellectual production, marking a decisive moment in the formation of researchers and in the advancement of scientific knowledge. As a complex and methodologically rigorous endeavor, it constitutes a central requirement of *stricto sensu* graduate programs, particularly at the doctoral level. Its relevance transcends the individual trajectory of the candidate, as it contributes directly to the scientific and technological development of society. Through this type of scholarly work, new knowledge is generated, theories are refined, and innovative responses to complex problems emerge.

In this context, the central objective of this study is to advance a theoretical discussion that clarifies the nature, structure, and development of the thesis from a dual perspective: (a) as a key element in the process of producing scientific knowledge and (b) as an academic product intended to demonstrate the researcher's ability to conduct independent, critical, coherent, consistent, and original inquiry. This theoretical examination is complemented by an applied example that illustrates possible pathways for constructing a thesis, drawing on the field of Youth and Adult Education (EJA) as an empirical point of reference.

Throughout the analysis, it is argued that a robust thesis must go beyond demonstrating mastery of established knowledge for the purposes of fulfilling institutional requirements. Above all, it should arise from the researcher's engagement with a real problem that emerges from social reality and expresses a concrete need, in the sense proposed by Saviani (2023). A thesis is thus conceived not as a technical exercise but as the outcome of a reflective process that transforms a historically situated problem into a theoretically grounded proposition.

Methodologically, this study is characterized as theoretical research. Its analytical foundations draw on scholars who offer epistemological, theoretical, and methodological contributions to



understanding how scientific knowledge is produced. It also incorporates experiential knowledge from the authors' academic trajectories and from their work as teachers, researchers, and supervisors of theses and dissertations in education and related fields.

To address its objectives, the article is organized into two main sections. The first presents a conceptual discussion on the meaning and function of the thesis, while the second offers theoretical–practical reflections on its construction within the field of Education. By elucidating the essential elements that constitute a thesis, the study aims to support researchers in training, academic advisors, and others engaged in producing and evaluating graduate-level scholarly work. Ultimately, it aspires to contribute to strengthening the quality and theoretical–methodological rigor of academic research in Brazil and to advancing scientific knowledge in the humanities and social sciences.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The construction of an academic thesis in Education is grounded in epistemological and methodological assumptions that shape how scientific knowledge is produced, validated, and socially situated. From a theoretical perspective, the thesis is not merely a formal academic requirement but a synthetic elaboration that emerges from the dialectical relationship between subject and object, embedded in a historically concrete reality. This section examines the theoretical foundations that sustain this understanding, drawing on classical and contemporary authors whose contributions inform epistemological debates in the humanities and in the field of Education.

A central starting point is the notion of problematization. According to Saviani (2023), a research problem arises from a real social necessity perceived by the researcher, rather than from arbitrary curiosity. A problem exists only when the unknown is also necessary to know, situating the thesis within broader historical and social conditions. This conception shifts research away from technical or procedural interpretations and underscores the need for reflective engagement with reality.

The subject–object relationship is also fundamental in Marx and Engels (1993), for whom consciousness is determined by material life conditions. This perspective reinforces the understanding that a thesis must be grounded in historically situated contradictions, demanding theoretical engagement capable of revealing the structure and dynamics of the phenomenon under investigation. Marx's (1973) methodological movement—from the concrete to the abstract and back to the concrete—provides a decisive orientation for constructing a theoretically robust thesis that connects empirical reality with conceptual elaboration.

This critical perspective contrasts with other epistemological traditions. Positivist approaches, exemplified by Durkheim (1978) and Carnap (1995), emphasize objectivity, verification, and conceptual precision but often fragment social phenomena into isolated variables. Popper's (2002) falsificationism advances the rigor of scientific testing, yet preserves a separation between subject and object that critical perspectives explicitly seek to overcome. Kuhn (2007), in turn, demonstrates that scientific knowledge is historically conditioned, shaped by paradigms that both enable and constrain what researchers can perceive, interpret, and theorize.



Methodological guidance offered by authors such as Lakatos and Marconi (2003), Gil (2002), Flick (2009), and Severino (2007) outlines systematic procedures for research design, data collection, and argument construction. However, such manuals should not be interpreted as prescriptive templates. Rather, they function as supportive tools, while the construction of a thesis requires theoretical autonomy and the capacity to situate methodological choices within broader epistemological assumptions.

In Education research, the recognition of the complexity of social phenomena demands theoretical frameworks attuned to totality rather than fragmentation. Giddens (1998) and Paulo Netto (2011) emphasize that understanding social processes requires theoretical density capable of capturing structures, agency, and historical transformations. This clarity is essential in interdisciplinary fields such as Education, where phenomena cannot be reduced to technical, behavioral, or micro-analytic descriptions.

Taken together, these perspectives reveal that an academic thesis is not a compilation of references or a set of procedural steps. It is a conceptual construction that requires critical engagement with reality, epistemological clarity, methodological coherence, and the ability to question, confront, refine, or extend established theories. In this sense, the thesis stands both as a product of scientific tradition and as an opportunity for innovation at the frontier of knowledge in Education.

3 METHODOLOGY

This study is developed as a theoretical and conceptual investigation grounded in epistemological, methodological, and philosophical reflections on the nature, structure, and development of the academic thesis within the field of Education. Because it does not involve empirical data collection, the research focuses on understanding how a thesis is formulated, justified, and theoretically sustained by examining the articulation between problematization, object delimitation, and the epistemological assumptions that orient scientific inquiry.

The methodological design is anchored in a critical-epistemological perspective. The selection of authors was guided by two criteria: (a) their relevance to central debates on the production of scientific knowledge in the humanities and social sciences; and (b) their contribution to understanding the relationship between theory, method, and object in educational research. Accordingly, classical and contemporary thinkers such as Marx, Engels, Saviani, Kuhn, Durkheim, Popper, Carnap, Giddens, Paulo Netto, Lakatos and Marconi, Gil, Severino, and Flick were mobilized. Their works offer analytical and conceptual tools that illuminate how knowledge is produced and how a thesis emerges as a synthetic construction rooted in historical and social conditions.

Methodologically, the study proceeds through three interrelated movements. The first consists of conceptual analysis, aimed at clarifying foundational notions—such as problem, empirical and theoretical objects, theory–method unity, and totality—which serve as the basis for understanding the epistemological status of a thesis. This conceptual reconstruction makes it possible to identify the theoretical tensions between positivist, neopositivist, and critical traditions, revealing how each epistemological orientation shapes what is recognized as a valid thesis.



The second movement involves problematization as a methodological principle. Drawing on Saviani's assertion that a research problem arises from a real and necessary question embedded in historical reality, this step reconstructs the process through which problems emerge as expressions of social necessity. By doing so, it demonstrates how the researcher's background, experiences, and theoretical repertoire guide the delimitation of the theme and the formulation of the problem that generates the thesis.

The third movement entails the systematic and integrative reconstruction of theoretical frameworks relevant to Education. This reconstruction allows for the articulation of epistemological debates with the practical demands of thesis construction, demonstrating how theory, method, and object form an inseparable triad. The purpose is not to prescribe a methodological template but to illuminate the theoretical–epistemological coherence required for the formulation of a robust thesis.

To illustrate the methodological reasoning, the study incorporates an analytical application to the field of Youth and Adult Education (EJA). This example is not presented as an empirical case but as a conceptual exercise demonstrating how the integration of structural conditions, educational dynamics, and theoretical references can lead to the formulation of a coherent, defensible thesis. The application shows how a research problem is identified, how the object is delimited, how variables are mapped, and how theoretical choices orient the construction of the thesis.

Thus, the methodological approach adopted emphasizes that producing a thesis in Education is not a mechanical or procedural task. Instead, it is a theoretically grounded process that unfolds through reflection, epistemological clarity, conceptual rigor, and critical engagement with reality. In this sense, the methodology serves not as a set of operational steps but as a reflective pathway through which the thesis—as a synthetic and original proposition—comes to be formulated.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

A academic thesis in education requires more than technical procedures or the accumulation of data and references. Its strength lies in the researcher's ability to recognize a problem that emerges from social reality and to transform this awareness into a theoretical proposition grounded in the articulation between object, theory and method. A thesis does not result from formal requirements alone but from a reflective process that links subjective motivations to objective historical conditions.

Rather than merely confirming established theories, the thesis must confront them, identify their limits and propose new interpretative paths. In fields such as education, marked by complexity and interdisciplinarity, this challenge becomes even more evident. Producing a relevant thesis therefore demands critical problematization, epistemological clarity and theoretical creativity.

Ultimately, a thesis is not an end in itself. It is an intellectual movement that seeks to understand the essence of a phenomenon, advance scientific knowledge and offer meaningful contributions for interpreting and transforming educational reality.



4.1 The Academic Thesis: A Conceptual Approach

It is hardly new that graduate students frequently report the anxieties and difficulties they face when required to produce innovative and theoretically consistent knowledge in their respective fields, while also meeting the standards demanded by their academic institutions. In the field of the human sciences, and more specifically in Education, this challenge appears even greater, given the need to consider social reality—and particularly educational reality—as complex and multidimensional.

It is often observed that concerns tend to center on the formal elements of knowledge production or on theoretical-methodological choices expressed through polarizations that privilege different facets of social reality, such as subjectivity versus objectivity; qualitative versus quantitative; micro versus macro. Issues related to the context that shaped the researcher's decisions, the contemporary state of the debate, the unanswered questions, and the possible responses supported by different theoretical frameworks frequently do not receive the attention they deserve.

Such a situation can lead to the production of academic theses that fail to emphasize aspects essential to generating knowledge that is genuinely meaningful to the field and capable of addressing the gaps left by “normal science” or recognized paradigms (Kuhn, 2007). Instead, these works may become centered on their technical nature. The structuring of the text, data collection and analysis strategies, and methodological choices become concerns that may entangle beginning researchers, steering them toward a well-crafted academic discourse grounded in procedures and rule-bound standards aligned with expectations of a productive and utilitarian science.

This article seeks to advance the discussion by approaching the theme from another perspective. Its central proposition is that an academic thesis (or any other scientific work) must begin with the author's subjective awareness of the problem that the study intends to address. This awareness is linked to the historical and social genesis of the problem—objectively given—which emerges through questioning reality in an attempt to confront a concrete need, as defined by Saviani (2023). Thus, the identification of the problem is directly connected to the researcher's background, which involves, as suggested by Lakatos & Marconi (2003), their worldview, their understanding of reality (empirical and grounded in the theoretical traditions they draw upon), as well as their life experiences and intuition.

Regarding the everyday meaning attributed to the term thesis, it is frequently heard in graduate-program hallways and classrooms that writing a doctoral thesis involves greater complexity than producing a master's dissertation. That complexity is often associated with the requirement to engage with a larger number of authors in order to build a more in-depth theoretical discussion, or the need to use additional research sources or more extensive datasets. But is that truly the case? Is the distinction merely related to deeper theoretical engagement, greater methodological elaboration, or access to more information?

To move toward an answer, it is necessary to delineate the concept of a thesis as an element that must be understood through the interconnection between object, theory, and scientific method. Its formulation requires explicit acknowledgment of the assumptions guiding the arguments that will support it and ensure its validity. Thus, it cannot be said that a thesis should privilege empiricism



and verification as its central foundations (Popper, 2002). Nor should the “object of study” be taken as a “thing,” an expression of reality that can be merely grasped (Durkheim, 1978). Nor are theoretical constructs and categories to be treated simply as expressions of relations among isolated variables, verifiable through precise linguistic and logical formulations—the criteria that, for Carnap (1995), would guarantee validity and institutional recognition. Rather, this discussion is grounded in the conception that the criterion for validating a thesis (scientific knowledge) is social practice, understood as the objective process of material production that constitutes the basis of human life and its continuous transformation, thereby serving as the foundation that gives meaning to theory (Marx and Engels, 1993).

To illustrate this point, one of the theses presented by Marx in a work co-authored with Engels is presented below:

Men are the producers of their representations, of their ideas and so forth, but real, active men, as they are conditioned by a particular development of their productive forces and by the relations of exchange corresponding to it [...] consciousness can never be anything other than conscious being, and the being of men is their real life-process [...] It is not consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness (Marx & Engels, 1993, p. 94)

The example and the preceding reflections seek to contribute to the understanding that a thesis is situated within broad conceptual ramifications that constitute a given theoretical framework. As can be seen, a thesis is not an end in itself, but rather an opening toward a range of analytical possibilities applied to objects of study that are increasingly broad and complex. It is therefore necessary to understand it more fully, given that, in the imaginaries of graduate students, it represents the apex of intellectual production at the postgraduate level.

In response to this need, numerous authors have dedicated themselves to producing manuals that define and characterize what constitutes a thesis and that guide the procedures for its development. In this regard, authors such as Lakatos and Marconi (2003), Gil (2002), Flick (2009), Severino (2007), Salomon (2004), Eco (2015), among others, may be cited.

Across these works, the authors underscore the precision, originality, and creativity that must characterize an academic thesis. They also emphasize the notion that “a doctoral thesis is a research work that addresses a single, specific, delimited, and restricted topic, with the purpose of presenting a relevant, original, and personal contribution to science” (Salomon, 2004, p. 260).

This conception reinforces the idea that a thesis should operate at the frontier of knowledge in its specific field, thus reaffirming a disciplinary perspective. In that case, however, one must ask: what about theses produced in the field of Education, which by nature is interdisciplinary? How can one conceptually think about delimiting a topic while simultaneously treating social phenomena as complex totalities—a notion that is foundational to contemporary studies in the field of Education?

Regarding the requirement of specialization, and the expectation that a thesis must focus on a single, delimited, and restricted topic, it is argued that concrete reality and the current state of knowledge production across different fields—with particular emphasis on Education—have



demonstrated the need to break away from highly specialized forms of knowledge. Even if this possibility is admitted, it becomes necessary to reflect on which social theory will serve as the foundation. How can a given phenomenon be delimited in order to address it in its specificity while also understanding it as a complex totality of lesser scope that integrates a broader complex totality, as Marx suggests in his theoretical-methodological reflections (Marx, 1973)? How can these mediations be explained or understood? Which epistemological and theoretical frameworks may be employed to advance such reflections? As can be seen, this is a process that requires extensive reading and sustained reflection, which gradually become incorporated into the researcher's discourse and argumentation.

Once again, an example is useful. If society is understood as a concrete totality, as argued by Marx (1973), then one cannot resort to the idea that society is a whole composed of functionally integrated parts that may be known in their simplest aspects, with the expectation that cumulative knowledge of the parts will lead to knowledge of the whole (Durkheim, 1978).

These references are essential, along with a broader set of theses on the meaning of social reality that guided the work of major thinkers who were instrumental in the formation of the disciplines that constitute the social sciences and the field of Education. These thinkers continue to foster productive dialogue, which justifies their status as classics, as Giddens (1998) asserts.

To advance the conceptual discussion on the thesis, the present study adopts a theoretical debate grounded in a critical perspective of knowledge, conceiving the thesis as an articulating element in the relationship between subject and object—thus requiring the inseparable consideration of the connections between theoretical elaboration and methodological formulation, all converging toward the search for solutions to research problems, whether theoretical, empirical, or practical, as illustrated earlier. Here, solutions are not treated in a pragmatic sense but rather as responses to needs that demand confrontation—needs that are social and, therefore, historical, as emphasized by Saviani (2023).

Accordingly, the research problem is understood as the element that mobilizes the researcher to construct knowledge, a process that demands the search for possible answers or the formulation of a thesis. However, an academic thesis should not be recognized solely for the individual merits of its author, as it represents a historical moment of dialogue and communication among peers, between scholars of the past and the present. It must not only provide a rigorous systematization of what has been said but also articulate possibilities for the future of knowledge.

The work of major foreign thinkers in the humanities—such as Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, Max Weber, Émile Durkheim, Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, Jürgen Habermas, and Hannah Arendt—as well as Brazilian thinkers such as Dermeval Saviani, Marilena Chauí, Anísio Teixeira, Paulo Freire, and Florestan Fernandes, among many others, exemplifies this. Their contributions consisted precisely in fostering dialogue and confronting established and recognized theories—what Kuhn (2007) would call “normal science”—by relating them to new and increasingly complex elements emerging from social reality. Through critical questioning of the possibilities of knowing the world, they translated dissatisfaction with existing answers into advances that broadened scientific knowledge in their respective fields.



Thus, on the one hand, the object of study that emerges from the researcher's interest is an existential fact (subjectivized), but on the other hand, it is always related to the researcher's background, shaped by their historical context (past and present), as highlighted by (Triviños, 1987). A thesis or dissertation does not begin with a search for procedural guides in research manuals. Nor is a theoretical framework selected simply because it is the approach used within the research group that graduate students join upon entering their programs. These elements form a complex web that reflects the stage at which the researcher—still in training—appropriates available scientific knowledge, professional experiences, intuitions, and more.

To support this perspective, we draw on Saviani's (2023) discussion in his work *Educação: do senso comum à consciência filosófica*, in which he addresses the notion of a problem from a philosophical standpoint: "the essence of a problem is necessity. [...] Thus, a question in itself does not constitute a problem, not even one whose answer is unknown; but a question whose answer is unknown and yet needs to be known—that is a problem." (Saviani, 2023, p. 17)

Saviani (2023) further emphasizes that the meaning of a problem should not be subjectivized, because necessity is not the result of individual experience; rather, it is a social necessity and therefore—here the text continues.

[...] can only exist if it rises to the conscious plane, that is, if it is perceived by human beings as such (subjective aspect); however, there are concrete circumstances that objectify the felt need, making it possible, on the one hand, to assess its real or supposed (fictitious) character and, on the other, to provide the means to satisfy it (Saviani, 2023, p. 18)

It can be observed that, in this case, the concept points toward a reflection on a central element in the formulation of a research problem: the problematization of reality. It is through the problematization of the reality that encompasses the object of study that the researcher is able to formulate the thesis that will guide the investigation.

Thus, it is from becoming aware of the object (a phenomenon of social reality) that a thesis emerges, gaining strength and centrality in the research process. By defining the object of study with precision—as the product of a problematization of reality constructed through various processes of approximation to the real—the researcher advances in the search for a possible answer.

It is from this perspective that one may understand how Marx identified as the central problem of his research the genesis, consolidation, development, and crisis conditions of bourgeois society, founded on the capitalist mode of production (Paulo Neto, 2011). This delimitation and precision, which matured throughout his life, was only possible because of the problematizations he conducted regarding reality and the explanations offered by past and contemporary scholars concerning the social phenomena in which he himself was immersed.

This offers yet another example of the profound connection between the researcher's personal mobilization (subjectivity) and the concrete historical conditions available to them (objectivity). It reveals that understanding social life requires, on the one hand, becoming aware of a need that must be confronted (a problem involving both an individual and a societal dimension), and on the



other, formulating a thesis defined in relation to the objective conditions in which the researcher is situated, with the aim of deepening studies to uncover elements of the structure and dynamics of the phenomenon under investigation.

At this point, it is possible to synthesize what has been conceptualized about the thesis and its relevance. A thesis is, therefore, a theoretical elaboration produced by a researcher as an active social subject. It must be “constructed with the aim of apprehending not the appearance or given form of the object, but its essence, its structure, and its dynamics [...] the subject must be capable of mobilizing a maximum amount of knowledge, criticizing it, revising it, and must be endowed with creativity and imagination” (Paulo Neto, 2011, p. 25).

Accordingly, it must be stressed that the object (the social phenomenon under study), theory, and method cannot be separated. The thesis emerges precisely at the intersection of these integrated elements—as a synthetic assertion resulting from the precise delimitation of the research object, constructed through constant problematizations, systematizations, and approximations of reality, which occur through intuition, accumulated theoretical knowledge, and the researcher’s everyday experiences and practices, enabling a movement from the concrete to the abstract and back to the concrete (Marx, 1973).

The thesis is, therefore, a proposition intended to respond to a problem understood as a need to be confronted (Saviani, 2023). It must be grounded in arguments capable of confronting, complementing, innovating, or expanding recognized knowledge—that is, knowledge validated objectively and intersubjectively by a given scientific community.

This is undoubtedly a significant challenge, since the training of beginning researchers often emphasizes the production of studies that merely explore the possibilities offered by established theories, with some going slightly further in seeking to identify their limits. This is evident in the way students frequently seek definitive guidance on which conceptual frameworks to adopt, positioning themselves within a comfort zone that restricts boldness and renders innovation, conjecture, and the possibility of refutation extraordinarily daunting.

To contribute to this challenge, the following section deepens the discussion on the thesis, outlining possible pathways for formulating a thesis in the field of Youth and Adult Education (EJA), thereby seeking to position it as an integrating element of the constitutive aspects involved in producing meaningful and pertinent scientific knowledge.

4.2 Pathways for Developing a Thesis: Focusing on Youth and Adult Education (EJA)

In this section, theoretical, conceptual, and epistemological reflections are presented regarding what constitutes a thesis as a proposition aimed at the theoretical-methodological development of different scientific fields, taking the field of education as a reference. The intention is to articulate the elements discussed in the previous section in order to produce examples of the necessary steps for formulating a thesis as an academic document required in doctoral programs, one that meets the argumentative and scientific standards recognized by the field of education, while also considering its structural and formal components.



To this end, the discussion begins with a general research theme and, throughout the elaboration, develops and comments on the constitutive elements that must shape the proposition of a thesis. In this process, theoretical reflections concerning the delimitation of the empirical and theoretical objects, as well as epistemological reflections on the thesis as a response to a research problem and on its place among the elements that compose a formal academic work, are undertaken to clarify the step-by-step path taken.

The starting point is a general theme and the process of delimiting it as an empirical and theoretical object upon which the thesis will be formulated: Youth and Adult Education (EJA).

Delimiting the theme from the perspective of defining its empirical object means precisely determining the reality one intends to observe, analyze, interpret, and verify. In this process, it is important to consider, as stated by Giddens (1998) e Triviños (1987), the conditions available to the researcher—that is, their background—which will provide the elements that give rise to the arguments to be produced.

The delimitation of the empirical object is therefore directly related to the experiences lived by the researcher, their interests, and the knowledge accumulated throughout life through formal education, family, social groups, professional practice, and so forth. For instance, within the same general theme of EJA, one researcher may define the use of digital technologies in this modality as the empirical object, whereas another may focus on EJA as a State policy in Brazil.

The delimitation of the object of study, in turn, requires defining the theoretical framework to be used as an analytical parameter—an effort that refers not only to accumulated knowledge about the object but also to the gaps in studies produced thus far. In this case, the procedure is also limited by the knowledge the researcher possesses. Theoretical choices therefore become central, presupposing mastery of epistemological foundations as well as social theories (Gil, 2022).

Close attention must be paid to the theoretical frameworks adopted for understanding how societies are constituted, transformed, and reproduced—elements that have shaped the development of social theory over time (Paulo Neto, 2011; Triviños, 1987; Giddens, 1998). At the same time, it is necessary to consider the assumptions that explain how knowledge about social life is constructed, including its feasibility and methodological implications, which presupposes reflecting on the relation between subject and object. What paths must the subject follow to know reality? How can social reality be apprehended? Can reality only be understood subjectively through the interpretations of social actors? Or are there objective regularities that can be empirically observed and measured through objective indicators? What do “indicators” and “evidence” mean within the social sciences and education?

Thus, the task is not merely to describe what is perceived about the object of study based on its appearance or the elements that initially draw the researcher’s attention. It becomes necessary to legitimize the research object and its resulting problem by “subjecting it to problematization procedures so that it may be situated within the cartography of research” (Severino, 2007).

To advance the example, the next step is the problematization of the chosen theme. At this stage, exploratory research procedures are required to provide arguments and foundations that help define the problem to be investigated. This will demand an initial examination of the chosen unit of analysis, which may be conducted through three main steps: defining the unit of



observation, identifying the variables involved, and examining possible connections among them (Severino, 2007).

It is through the process of defining the relationships among the variables involved in the problem—outlined through the problematization of the object of study situated within its structure and dynamics (Paulo Neto, 2011)—that the researcher's critical and creative argumentative capacity emerges, marking their first steps toward constructing the thesis to be defended.

Following this, an example of problematizing the EJA theme is presented using the three steps indicated by Severino (2007): delimiting the unit of observation, identifying the variables, and verifying the possible relationships among them.

When defining Youth and Adult Education (EJA) as the theme of study, it becomes necessary to problematize it as a concrete social phenomenon, given its importance in the Brazilian educational context as a modality that provides learning opportunities to those who, due to exclusionary processes rooted in structural inequality, were unable to complete basic education at the age prescribed by law. Fundamentally, EJA represents the recognition of a right to education that must be guaranteed.

However, despite this formal recognition, EJA faces high dropout rates that compromise its outcomes, both for society and for the learners themselves. Understanding the genesis of these results requires situating EJA within its complex connections—as an expression of totality and of the mediations that shape society, considering its structural and dynamic aspects, as Marx (1973) teaches. In this regard, Mainardes (2018) offers important elements for identifying the determinations that help explain social phenomena related to public policies in Brazil, particularly context, actors, processes, and outcomes.

One way of problematizing EJA as a concrete social phenomenon and uncovering its essence (structure and dynamics) is to consider its complexity, relating it to significant challenges both in its structural aspects and in its dynamics of implementation. To organize this analysis, a set of structural elements shaping EJA in Brazil is initially identified, all related to the material conditions of production of the phenomenon, including:

- a) the Brazilian social context marked by historical inequalities that have excluded broad segments of the population from quality public education—a reality evident in statistics on access, permanence, and performance;
- b) insufficient public policies and investment to meet the specific needs of EJA, expressed in the frequent lack of resources, infrastructure, adequate didactic materials, technological equipment, and appropriate learning spaces;
- c) teacher training issues, including insufficient preparation for work with EJA's target population and high turnover, which undermines long-term educational projects.

Regarding its dynamics, the structural conditions shaping EJA have historically contributed to a persistent and well-known phenomenon: school dropout, driven by various factors such as difficulty reconciling work and study, lack of motivation, and learning challenges. This is compounded by the negative perception that many educators, students, and society hold of EJA, which can hinder



its recognition as a “problem” in the sense proposed by Saviani (2023)—that is, a social need that must be confronted.

Another relevant dynamic relates to curriculum: EJA requires curricular projects aligned with learners’ profiles, which demands intentional and conscious action by schools and teachers. Linked to the curriculum, classroom pedagogical practices also demand attention, given the recurring call in the literature for methodological transformation.

In contemporary discussions, researchers aligned with the historical-critical pedagogy grounded in Marxist and Gramscian social theory (Saviani, 2023; Duarte, 2013; Marsiglia & Batista, 2012; Malanchen, 2016) highlight intentionality, criticality, autonomy, and creativity as key mediating elements in pedagogical practice capable of enabling an educational praxis geared toward social transformation.

Within this debate, the importance of innovating pedagogical practices—with emphasis on methodological changes that place students and their social practices at the center—has been widely recognized, especially given the profound changes characterizing contemporary societies, driven in part by information and digital technologies

It is undeniable that digital technologies are now integral to social life. As Castells (1999, p. 49) argues, we are living through one of the rare historical intervals marked by a transformation of our “material culture” through a new technological paradigm centered on information technologies—a paradigm that has intensified inequalities between those included in and excluded from this new world. Tapscott (1999) refers to a new digital generation, composed of people of all ages who use digital networks and produce content. In this context, how should schools respond in their educational projects for children and adolescents? And, more specifically, for young people and adults—the focus of this study?

These are essential considerations when attempting to understand the dynamics experienced within public schools offering EJA and within their classrooms. The present study considers the phenomenon in its complexity, as part of a simple totality connected to the broader complex totality of Brazilian capitalist society. To delimit the object more precisely, digital technologies are identified as a possible mediating element of interest. From this perspective, we advance toward delimiting the unit of observation for the proposed study and defining the research problem to be investigated.

Mobilizing questions then emerge: What does EJA represent within the Brazilian educational system? What is expected from the formation it provides? What do EJA students expect from schooling in light of their current life circumstances? How can EJA promote a truly critical and emancipatory education? How can it be articulated with the demands of contemporary society marked by digital technologies? How can digital technologies contribute to access to information as a pathway to autonomous and critical knowledge production? How can historical-critical pedagogy guide pedagogical practices aimed at confronting dropout? These and many other questions arise from the problematization previously developed, but the thesis work must define the study’s focus and precisely delineate the research problem.

Having problematized the theme considering its structural and dynamic aspects, the study proposes to investigate the issue of school dropout in EJA by examining possible relationships



between variables emerging from reflections on the contribution of historical-critical pedagogy as a foundation for transformative pedagogical action mediated by digital technologies.

Thus, without losing sight of the mediations between structure and dynamics within EJA, the study identifies its central empirical object as the issue of dropout and its theoretical object as the potential contributions of digital technologies to EJA when oriented by historical-critical pedagogy (Saviani, 1991). This theoretical object requires advancing beyond the conceptual anchoring that supports debate around the variables in question, moving toward a proposition mobilizing new knowledge derived from lived educational practice in EJA.

Up to this point, following the guidance of we have attempted to situate the unit of observation and identify the variables within the phenomenon as a simple totality making up a broader totality (Marx, 1973). The next step is to establish possible relationships between these variables, which will determine the formulation of the thesis guiding the entire study.

It is considered, therefore, that integrating digital technologies into pedagogical projects and actions in EJA—given their centrality in contemporary social life—may serve as an important element in addressing classroom challenges, particularly those linked to fostering student engagement and reducing dropout.

Based on this reasoning, the present study, titled “Youth and Adult Education: Integrating Digital Technologies to Promote Engagement and Reduce School Dropout,” seeks to investigate how the incorporation of such technologies into the EJA curriculum may positively influence student engagement and consequently reduce dropout rates.

The research thus begins with the following question: How can the integration of digital technologies into the Youth and Adult Education curriculum influence student engagement and school dropout rates?

Drawing on studies concerning the theme (Arroyo, 2012; Freire, 2005; Paiva, 2005; Silva, 2017), the following relationship among the variables is proposed: the use of digital technologies in pedagogical practices in EJA, when grounded in a critical pedagogy whose intention is to provide students access to socially produced knowledge that is historically constructed and contested, may promote greater student engagement in their formative processes and reduce dropout.

Given this relationship, the thesis proposed is the following: the effective integration of digital technologies into the Youth and Adult Education curriculum, when guided by a critical pedagogical approach that understands the school as a space of struggle for access to socially relevant knowledge, not only increases student engagement but may also reduce dropout, enhance educational quality, and help ensure the right to education for a population historically excluded from schooling.

Taking this thesis as a reference, the independent variable in this case is the pedagogical approach guiding teacher practice. Its intentionality—attuned to an understanding of the processes structuring access to schooling and to socially produced knowledge, long the object of intense power struggles—will determine how digital technologies are used, fostering a form of engagement that may be critical (engagement as praxis expressing intentional action toward individual and social transformation) or alienated (engagement as simple interaction with technological tools



devoid of critical recognition of their educational or political potential) (Sánchez-Vázquez, 1980; Gramsci, 2012).

One of the concepts to be developed in the broader contemporary debate on historical-critical pedagogy will therefore be the distinction between critical engagement and alienated engagement, using EJA as the empirical reference. This conceptual development will require engaging other notions linked to critical pedagogy to support the construction of a concept of engagement—critical and alienated—as a possibility for forming autonomous, critical, and creative social subjects. Within the proposed thesis, digital technologies and dropout thus appear as dependent variables.

The steps outlined above aim to guarantee theoretical consistency, coherence, epistemological rigor, and awareness of the theoretical foundations necessary for proposing a thesis. They encompass the initial problematization needed to define the empirical and theoretical objects, the definition of the problem, the identification of variables and their possible relationships, and the concise formulation of the thesis.

After these definitions, additional key elements compose the formal structure of the thesis and serve to support its central claim. These elements are essential for organizing the work: identifying the concepts and aspects to be explored in depth; structuring the main chapters or sections; and helping the researcher maintain focus throughout the study. For the reader, these key elements provide a clear map of the main arguments to be addressed.

The debatable aspects of the thesis constitute another indispensable component, as they present points of controversy or potential critique related to the theme. This section demonstrates the complexity and relevance of the topic, anticipates potential counterarguments, and positions the thesis within existing academic debates. By including these aspects, the researcher promotes critical thinking and situates the work within a broader scholarly dialogue.

Finally, the implications for research indicate the directions and areas of investigation suggested or required by the thesis. This component is fundamental for guiding methodological development, suggesting pathways for data collection and analysis, and identifying areas requiring deeper investigation. These implications show the relevance and potential impact of the study and highlight its contribution to advancing knowledge in its field.

Together, these elements—the central thesis, the key components, the debatable aspects, and the research implications—constitute a comprehensive and cohesive structure. They offer a precise understanding of the scope, depth, and direction of the proposed research, serving as an effective roadmap for the development of the study. This structure ensures that all essential aspects are addressed logically and coherently, enabling the researcher to construct a well-founded argument and allowing the reader to follow and critically evaluate its development throughout the academic work.

5 CONCLUSION

The analyses presented herein sought to advance the understanding of the thesis both as an academic product and as a high-level scientific contribution to the production of knowledge across



different fields of human inquiry, and more specifically within the field of education. The aim was also to offer readers—particularly graduate students—conceptual and methodological elements to guide them in producing work of greater quality and theoretical-methodological rigor.

Accordingly, it is emphasized that a thesis should not merely attempt to confirm what is already expressed in established theories, since it must move beyond them. Such contribution is essential, for it is through this process that a theory—understood as a network of concepts and definitions seeking to elucidate a natural phenomenon or a social relation—can evolve and thereby deepen scientific knowledge.

Thus, both the confrontation of consolidated theories within specific scientific fields and the proposition of new ones undoubtedly demand creativity and imagination, which require time for intellectual formation, dedication, extensive reading, and collaborative work within research groups. In this sense, it is important to underline that a doctoral thesis should aspire to promote confrontations and contestations among recognized theories and paradigms, gather evidence of discrepancies among them, investigate phenomena that do not conform to explanations accepted within validated theoretical frameworks, and propose alternatives. In other words, doctoral students should be encouraged to contradict a given theory, or to contrast different theories by developing arguments to challenge, expand, or—even more ambitiously—create new theoretical formulations.

Therefore, drawing on a common definition, it may be said that a thesis must serve as the central idea of a scientific text—an idea that guides the argumentation and reflects what will be defended as a response to a research problem. As one of the most crucial components of an argumentative text, it must be explicit and present a point of view, that is, the author's critical stance. To problematize this conventional sense of the concept, it is argued in conclusion that a robust doctoral thesis should not aim merely to confirm the prevailing theories chosen to frame the analysis of its object and respond to the research problem. Rather, it should present theoretical and/or empirical arguments to contest, complement, or revise them by identifying their limitations, thereby advancing scientific knowledge in the field to which the study belongs.

In this way, a thesis must—and can—be more than a well-crafted academic document intended solely to secure a doctoral degree for its author. It should represent an original contribution to the understanding of its object of study, the result of more complex and in-depth research. This is the sense of innovation, creativity, and originality that ought to be attributed to a thesis.

Artificial Intelligence (AI)

This manuscript involved the use of the artificial intelligence tool ChatGPT solely for the purpose of translating portions of the text from Portuguese to English. The authors reviewed, verified, and edited all AI-generated outputs to ensure accuracy, clarity, and full compliance with academic and ethical standards. All intellectual contributions, interpretations, and analytical content are the sole responsibility of the authors. No AI tool was used to generate original ideas, data analysis, or theoretical arguments, and the use of ChatGPT does not constitute authorship.



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