

## THE YOUTH AND ADULT EDUCATION POLICY IN THE MUNICIPALITY OF IMPERATRIZ/MA

### A POLÍTICA DE EDUCAÇÃO DE JOVENS E ADULTOS NO MUNICÍPIO DE IMPERATRIZ/MA

### LA POLÍTICA DE EDUCACIÓN DE JÓVENES Y ADULTOS EN EL MUNICIPIO DE IMPERATRIZ/MA



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#### ABSTRACT

Youth and Adult Education (EJA) in Brazil is a fundamental component of inclusive education; however, it faces a series of structural and social challenges that compromise its development and student retention. In many localities, especially in peripheral areas, difficulties related to the labor market, the overload of family responsibilities, and the lack of institutional support make the educational process even more challenging. This article investigates the relationship between Youth and Adult Education and the world of work in the city of Imperatriz, Maranhão, a municipality characterized by significant social and economic inequalities. From this perspective, the study seeks to critically analyze the advances and challenges of EJA policy based on the materialization of this educational modality at the Maria Evangelista Municipal School, located in the municipality of Imperatriz/MA. In addition, the study explores the importance of humanizing the educational process by providing a space of inclusion and transformation that takes into account the specificities of the local context and the realities of those living on the urban periphery.

**Keywords:** Youth and Adult Education. EJA. Educational Policy. Social Inequality. Imperatriz.

#### RESUMO

O Ensino Jovem Adulto (EJA) no Brasil é um componente fundamental da educação inclusiva, mas enfrenta uma série de desafios estruturais e sociais que comprometem seu desenvolvimento e a permanência dos estudantes. Em muitas localidades, especialmente nas periferias, as dificuldades relacionadas ao mercado de trabalho, à sobrecarga de responsabilidades familiares e à falta de apoio institucional tornam o processo educativo ainda mais desafiador. Este artigo investiga as relações entre a educação da EJA e o mundo do trabalho na cidade de Imperatriz, Maranhão, um município caracterizado por suas desigualdades sociais e econômicas. A partir dessa perspectiva, busca-se analisar, de maneira crítica, os avanços, desafios da política da EJA, a partir da materialidade dessa

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modalidade educacional na Escola Municipal Maria Evangelista, localizada no município de Imperatriz/MA. Além disso, explora-se a importância de humanizar o processo educacional, proporcionando um espaço de acolhimento e transformação que considere as especificidades do contexto local e as realidades de quem vive na periferia urbana.

**Palavras-chave:** Educação de Jovens e Adultos. EJA. Política Educacional. Desigualdade Social. Imperatriz.

## RESUMEN

La Educación de Jóvenes y Adultos (EJA) en Brasil constituye un componente fundamental de la educación inclusiva; sin embargo, enfrenta una serie de desafíos estructurales y sociales que comprometen su desarrollo y la permanencia de los estudiantes. En muchas localidades, especialmente en las periferias, las dificultades relacionadas con el mercado laboral, la sobrecarga de responsabilidades familiares y la falta de apoyo institucional hacen que el proceso educativo sea aún más desafiante. Este artículo investiga la relación entre la Educación de Jóvenes y Adultos y el mundo del trabajo en la ciudad de Imperatriz, Maranhão, un municipio caracterizado por profundas desigualdades sociales y económicas. Desde esta perspectiva, se busca analizar de manera crítica los avances y desafíos de la política de la EJA a partir de la materialización de esta modalidad educativa en la Escuela Municipal Maria Evangelista, ubicada en el municipio de Imperatriz/MA. Asimismo, se explora la importancia de humanizar el proceso educativo, proporcionando un espacio de acogida y transformación que considere las especificidades del contexto local y las realidades de quienes viven en la periferia urbana.

**Palabras clave:** Educación de Jóvenes y Adultos. EJA. Política Educativa. Desigualdad Social. Imperatriz.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Youth and Adult Education (EJA), historically relegated to the margins of the Brazilian educational structure, is a privileged expression of the contradictions of the country's social formation. From the colonial period, through the Empire and the Republic, access to education was concentrated in the economic, political and racial elites, reproducing the classist and excluding character of the Brazilian State (SAVIANI, 2011; LOMBARDI, 2008). Thus, the marginalization of young people and adults who did not have access to school at the "appropriate" age is not an accidental phenomenon, but the result of the very logic of reproduction of inequality characteristic of dependent capitalism (FERNANDES, 1972; MARINI, 1973).

EJA plays an essential role in the process of social inclusion and reduction of inequalities in Brazil. However, the country has serious challenges in the high dropout rates of the EJA program. According to data from the 2022 School Census, this rate was 21.7% between 2018 and 2022, with a dropout rate of 19.75% in elementary school and 24.7% in high school. In the year 2024, the school census data show that enrollment in EJA continues to fall, with 2.4 million students in 2024, the lowest level since 2020. In 2024, there were a total of 2.4 million enrollments, a reduction of 600 thousand students compared to 2020 (INEP, 2025). being a problem that has been developing, affecting not only the dropout individuals, but an entire community or environment in which they find themselves.

This whole context grows when observed and analyzed in a regional way, as in the case of Maranhão, a state with a large historical framework of socioeconomic inequality that threatens the development of young people and adults in Maranhão supported by the EJA program. Maranhão, according to IBGE data (2025), has the lowest average monthly household income per capita in Brazil, reaching R\$ 1,078 in 2024; The state has the highest proportion of poor people in Brazil, with 57.90% in 2021, and the second highest rate of extreme poverty in the country; 5.1% of the persons per household live with severe food insecurity. With regard to data on education in the state, Maranhão has the lowest Human Development Index (HDI) in the education dimension, with an index of 0.612; Approximately only 11% of the population of Maranhão has higher education and 11.4% of the population is illiterate (IBGE, 2025).

The Maranhão Institute of Socioeconomic and Cartographic Studies indicates that data from IMESC point to high dropout numbers of EJA students in Maranhão, who often find themselves in a circle of lack of economic control and educational structural deficiency. These aspects are combined to create an environment in which many students drop out of school because they are unable to reconcile learning with their daily obligations such as work and

livelihoods, or because they do not find the social justifications to study, due to stereotypes focused on ages, gender and even the places and communities where they live where there is no incentive to study.

EJA is therefore located at the intersection between work, inequality and social reproduction. As Mészáros (2008) argues, capitalism not only produces inequalities: it needs them to preserve itself, subordinating education to the demands of accumulation. The school exclusion of workers and their subsequent reintegration in the form of compensatory policies is part of the cycle of expanded reproduction of this social order. In the Brazilian case, marked by massive informality, overexploitation of labor, and racial and regional inequality, EJA reveals the most explicit face of the secular denial of the right to education to the popular classes, especially to black women and precarious workers (ARROYO, 2017; GONZALEZ, 1988).

Recent data reinforce this structural thesis. Between 2018 and 2024, EJA enrollments had a significant reduction, falling from 3 million to 2.4 million students (INEP, 2025), while school dropout remained above 21%, as already mentioned in previous lines. These indicators cannot be explained by supposed "individual disinterest", but rather by the objective living conditions of this population, marked by long working hours, informality, high prices, urban violence, domestic overload and the absence of intersectoral public policies. As Antunes (2018) points out, the advance of neoliberalism has intensified the precariousness of life, producing "exhausted subjectivities" incapable of guaranteeing educational stability.

The city of Imperatriz/MA expresses, on a local scale, these structural determinations. Disorderly urban growth, the absence of robust public policies, socio-spatial segregation and the predominance of informal work constitute the daily scenario in which the Maria Evangelista Municipal School is inserted, located in a periphery marked by social vulnerability and precarious public services. The reality of its students, mostly poor women, housewives, informal workers and heads of household, synthesizes the relationship between class, gender, race and territory in the constitution of the subjects of EJA (HIRATA; KERGOAT, 2007; ARROYO, 2017).

Interrupted school trajectories, late return to school, strenuous domestic responsibilities and constant migration between precarious occupations make up the picture that explains the strong dropout rate of this modality. As Charlot (2000) argues, "school failure is always socially produced, and it is necessary to understand the conditions of existence of students in order to interpret their relationship with knowledge" (p.27). In EJA, this is even more evident, as its subjects are workers who daily compete for their time, energy and survival with the demands of capital.

However, Freire (1987) reminds us that, even in the most adverse contexts, adult education constitutes a privileged space for the construction of critical awareness, autonomy and reading of the world. For him, EJA is, above all, a humanizing project that must start from the concrete reality of the oppressed, recognizing their life experience as social and political knowledge. In dialogue with this perspective, Saviani (2011) states that an emancipatory educational policy cannot ignore the class determination that runs through the educational process, at the risk of reducing EJA to a mere compensatory action.

Thus, understanding EJA in Imperatriz/MA requires articulating it to the social totality, recognizing that its materiality is produced at the intersection between fragile policies, historical inequalities, precarious work, urban segregation and interrupted school trajectories. The analysis of this educational modality demands, therefore, a critical approach that considers both the macrosocial conditioning factors and the local and singular expressions of the subjects involved.

In view of this, this article aims to analyze, from a theoretical-critical perspective based on historical-dialectical materialism, the limits, potentialities and contradictions of the Youth and Adult Education policy in the municipality of Imperatriz/MA, taking the Maria Evangelista Municipal School as an empirical axis. To this end, empirical data, institutional documents and classical and contemporary theoretical references are articulated that discuss education, work, public policy and inequality, with emphasis on Freire, Saviani, Frigotto, Arroyo, Kuenzer, Ciavatta, Mészáros, Charlot and other authors in the critical field.

The critical perspective that guides the discussions developed here highlights the need for a dialogical, participatory and contextualized education, according to the Freirean method, based on the assertion that education must start from the concrete reality of students, recognizing their knowledge and life experiences as a starting point for the construction of knowledge (Freire, 1987). After all, understanding the Youth and Adult Education policy is not just an academic exercise, but a commitment to social justice and the democratization of access to knowledge.

## **2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Youth and Adult Education (EJA) only becomes intelligible when we situate its genesis and development in the historical movement of Brazilian social formation as a concrete totality. As Marx (2011) warned, scientific analysis requires apprehending the phenomenon in its multiple nexuses, that is, as a synthesis of historical, economic, political and cultural determinations that are condensed in a specific educational form. In this sense, EJA is a product of the long duration of structural inequalities, and not an episodic phenomenon.

Saviani (2011) interprets Brazilian education as a mechanism for the expanded reproduction of relations of domination, operating in the ideological superstructure as an instance of legitimation of order. The selective function of the school, expressed in the dualization between hegemonic education for the elites and precarious schooling for workers, shows that school inequality is not a dysfunction, but a structural function of dependent capitalism (FRIGOTTO, 2010; KUENZER, 2017).

EJA, therefore, emerges as a compensatory policy, aimed at remedying ex post facto the gaps produced by the education system itself. Haddad and Di Pierro (2000) demonstrate that no EJA policy was conceived as a strategy for the universalization of rights, but always as an emergency response to alarming rates of functional illiteracy, rates that, in turn, result from the articulation between poverty, exploitation and the historical absence of massive social policies.

EJA is presented, therefore, as a pedagogical expression of a society founded on structural inequality and the historical denial of the right to full education.

In Brazil, EJA is an essential educational modality for the correction of historical inequalities in access to schooling. Aimed at subjects who, for various reasons, did not complete basic education at the regular age, it is both a social right and a fundamental strategy for the promotion of citizenship and inclusion (Brasil, 1996). The trajectory of EJA in the country reflects the challenges inherent to the universalization of education in a reality marked by deep socioeconomic disparities.

In the 1990s, neoliberalism inaugurated a qualitatively distinct phase in the relationship between the State, capital and educational policy. It is no longer just a question of the old structural duality; now the State is repositioned as an apparatus that guarantees the financial reproduction of capital, through deregulation, privatization and permanent austerity (HARVEY, 2005).

In this neoliberal perspective, EJA undergoes a double process, the first is Programmatic Relegation, where neoliberalism operates through the logic of "efficient downsizing" (GENTILI, 2002). EJA, because it is not economically profitable and serves invisible subjects, becomes a preferred target of budget cuts and political discontinuity. The second process is Ideological Reinterpretation, following the statement of Althusser (1985) who states that the school is the main ideological apparatus of the State. Under neoliberal hegemony, it begins to inculcate values such as: self-entrepreneurship, meritocracy, individual accountability, depoliticization of poverty, adaptation to market demands.

Shiroma, Evangelista and Moraes (2011) show that EJA is now resignified as a space for the "recovery of productive citizenship", shifting the struggle for rights to a discourse of individual competence.

The Gramscian reading is decisive here in stating that neoliberalism reconfigures hegemony, transforming the school into an arena for the production of pro-market consensus (GRAMSCI, 2011). EJA loses its critical and social character, being framed in the technicist rationality of "employability".

Following the analysis of the neoliberal State, Poulantzas (1978) adds that it intervenes selectively to guarantee the interests of the dominant fractions of capital, especially financial capital and transnational corporations. Thus, when the State disinvests in EJA, it is not "absence", but the active presence of the logic of capital.

EJA thus becomes a space where neoliberal policies and discourses intensify precariousness: lack of teachers, multigrade classes, absence of materials, low night supply and generalized institutional abandonment.

From a legal point of view, EJA finds its foundation in the Federal Constitution of 1988, which guarantees the right to education for all. This right is detailed by Law No. 9,394, of December 20, 1996 - the Law of Guidelines and Bases of National Education (LDB), which recognizes it as an integral part of basic education. However, as Ribeiro and Paiva (2021, p. 16) warn, "the effective implementation of this modality has been limited by structural problems and the prejudiced view that still persists in relation to its subjects and their social function". Such challenges are aggravated by discontinuous public policies, insufficient funding and the devaluation of educators and students.

The critical analysis of EJA must recognize that its students are precarious workers, inserted in the dynamics of super-exploitation (MARINI, 1973). Work — a fundamental ontological category — structures the experience of these subjects. Marx (2013) reminds us that work is a central mediation in the constitution of the social being; when it is precarious, it becomes a denial of the human possibility of omnilateral development.

In peripheral Brazil, such precariousness takes specific forms, such as: structural informality, turnover and chronic unemployment, long hours without rights, concentration of black women in reproductive work, low pay, urban violence and insecurity.

Arroyo (2017) calls these paths "biographies marked by social denial". They reveal that school interruption is not an individual choice or pedagogical failure, but the result of the founding contradiction between the need to survive and the material impossibility of remaining in school.

Charlot (2000) expands the analysis by demonstrating that the relationship with knowledge is mediated by the historicity of the subject. When the subject lives under multiple structural forms of violence — hunger, racism, misogyny, informality, compulsory care — his or her permanence is systematically made unfeasible.

Gonzalez (1988) and Fanon (2008) show that race and gender are constitutive dimensions of the working class in the peripheries. Thus, black women, the majority base of EJA, face a triple oppression: class, race and gender. This explains its presence and, at the same time, its vulnerability in EJA.

Thus, the subjects of EJA are not "backward students", but workers expropriated of time, rights and schooling.

In the face of these structural determinations, the pedagogical challenge of EJA is not technical, but ontological and political. Freire (1987) states that "there is no reading of the world without a critical reading of reality" (p.38).

Historically, EJA has been linked to literacy initiatives, such as the National Literacy Plan (1964) - interrupted by the military regime - and, later, to the Campaign for the Eradication of Illiteracy. From the 1990s onwards, the modality gained new momentum with programs such as Literate Brazil and, more recently, in 2005, with the National Youth Inclusion Program (ProJovem), which aimed to combat dropout and promote the social inclusion of young people between 18 and 29 years old who did not complete elementary school (MEC, 2024). However, for Arroyo (2005, p. 21), "these policies often focus on education as a corrective mechanism, without considering the emancipatory and transformative potential that EJA can and should assume".

Decree No. 5,154, of July 23, 2004, which regulates EJA, is an important milestone in detailing the flexibility of teaching methodologies, essential to meet the diversity of experiences and needs of students. He specifies that EJA should be offered with a pedagogical approach adapted to the conditions of time and pace of learning, enabling quality education for those who, for various reasons, interrupted their studies (Brasil, 2004).

In 2021, CNE/CEB Opinion No. 1, approved by the National Education Council, reinforced the need for a specific and adapted EJA. The document recognizes that this modality should be more than a retrieval of content; it should be a tool for citizenship education, allowing students to develop cognitive, social, and political skills, being encouraged to actively participate in community life (Brasil, 2021).

The pedagogical perspective that guides this work is aligned with the thought of Paulo Freire (1987), for whom education should start from the concrete reality of students, recognizing their knowledge and experiences as a starting point for the construction of

knowledge. A dialogical, participatory and contextualized education is, therefore, fundamental for EJA to fulfill its emancipatory role.

However, the transformative potential of EJA comes up against an adverse socioeconomic reality. Silva and Carvalho (2020, p. 781) find that "more than 70% of EJA students face situations of social vulnerability, such as unemployment, informal work, and lack of access to basic services, factors that compromise their educational trajectory". This scenario is aggravated by the precarious training of educators. Oliveira and Lima (2019, p. 574) point out that "there is a significant gap in the initial and continuing training of teachers who work in EJA, resulting in pedagogical practices that often do not dialogue with the realities of students".

Despite the obstacles, EJA maintains its potential as an inclusion strategy. As Haddad (2022, p. 09) points out, "EJA is more than a compensatory policy; It is an inclusion strategy that can contribute to the reduction of social inequalities and the strengthening of democracy." For this potential to be realized, a joint effort between government, civil society, and educational institutions is imperative, ensuring robust funding, adequate teacher training, and supportive policies that ensure not only access, but student permanence, and success.

### **3 METHODOLOGY: RESEARCH PATHS**

This investigation is anchored in the epistemology of Historical-Dialectical Materialism, understood not only as a method, but as a critical epistemology of social reality, founded on the ontology of social being (MARX, 2011). Thus, the research does not seek to describe appearances, but to understand the genesis, movement and internal logic of educational phenomena in the Brazilian social formation.

The fundamental ontological principle is that educational phenomena are historical and social products, determined by the totality of the relations of production and by the class struggle.

EJA, therefore, is investigated not as an isolated modality, but as an educational form dialectically linked to the structure of dependent capitalism (MARINI, 1973), to forms of labor exploitation (ANTUNES, 2018), to neoliberal austerity policies (GENTILI, 2002), to disputes for hegemony in the State (GRAMSCI, 2011; POULANTZAS, 1978), to the pedagogical practices of resistance (FREIRE, 1987; ARROYO, 2017).

We start from the principles of Totality where EJA is understood in its macrostructural determinations (State, capitalism, public policies) and in its local mediations (school daily life, territory, concrete subjects). From the principle of Historicity, where each category analyzed (evasion, permanence, work, territory, curriculum) is situated in its historical process, not

treated as a timeless phenomenon, and from the principle of Contradiction considering that EJA is a space of dispute between right and denial of right, between emancipation and adaptation, between neoliberal hegemony and popular resistance.

The research adopted a qualitative approach of an exploratory and descriptive nature, based on the Freirean critical perspective, which understands education as a transformative social practice (Freire, 2019). The study is part of the interpretative paradigm, seeking to understand the meanings, experiences and representations of the subjects involved in Youth and Adult Education (EJA) in their specific context, as proposed by Minayo (2014, p. 22), for whom qualitative research works with "the universe of meanings, motives, aspirations, beliefs, values and attitudes".

The universe of the research was divided by the seventeen students enrolled in the EJA modality of the Maria Evangelista Municipal School, located in the Itamagará neighborhood, municipality of Imperatriz/MA. The selection of the locus is justified by its location in a peripheral area characterized by significant socioeconomic vulnerabilities, configuring itself as a representative environment of the complexities faced by EJA in peripheral urban contexts.

Data collection was structured in three articulated methodological procedures, following the principle of triangulation to ensure validity and comprehensiveness of the investigation.

A priori, a documentary research was carried out through a systematic analysis of official records provided by the Municipal Department of Education of Imperatriz SEMED, covering data on enrollment, attendance, dropout and demographic characteristics of Youth and Adult Education (EJA) students in the year 2024. This stage enabled the quantitative contextualization of the phenomenon studied and the identification of trends and patterns at the municipal level.

Then, ethnographic field research was conducted in the EJA class of the Maria Evangelista Municipal School. This phase included: unstructured participant observation over ten face-to-face meetings between August and November 2024, allowing immersion in everyday school life and the capture of group interactions and dynamics, application of a semi-structured questionnaire, containing open and closed questions, to all seventeen students, an instrument that enabled the systematic recording of perceptions, trajectories, and expectations; and individual semi-structured interviews, with an average duration of 45 minutes, recorded with prior consent and later transcribed, which deepened the participants' understanding of subjective experiences and the meanings attributed to education.

Finally, the qualitative data obtained were submitted to thematic content analysis, as

proposed by Bardin (2011):

"a set of communication analysis techniques aimed at obtaining, through systematic and objective procedures for describing the content of messages, indicators (quantitative or not) that allow the inference of knowledge related to the conditions of production/reception (inferred variables) of these messages". (Bardin. 2011, p. 37)

The analytical process was developed in three phases: pre-analysis, characterized by the organization and floating reading of the material; exploration of the material, with coding and classification of data; and treatment of the results, involving the inference and interpretation of the contents. From this process, analytical categories emerged that reflect the experiences, perceptions and challenges experienced by the students, while the quantitative data were treated through descriptive statistical analysis, complementing the interpretation of the investigated phenomena.

The construction of the research instruments was based on the ethical principles established by Resolution No. 510/2016 of the National Health Council. All participants signed a Free and Informed Consent Form (ICF), guaranteeing anonymity through the use of numerical coding (Student 1, Student 2, etc.). The research obtained prior approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the home institution.

The methodological triangulation combining documentary analysis, participant observation, questionnaires and interviews ensured analytical rigor and internal validity to the research findings, as recommended by Minayo (2014) when he highlights that "the triangulation of methods and techniques is an important strategy to apprehend the complexity of social phenomena". This multifaceted approach allowed capturing the complexity of the object studied, overcoming limitations of isolated methods and ensuring greater consistency in the interpretations performed.

#### **4 THE POLITICS OF EJA IN BRAZIL**

The Youth and Adult Education policy in Brazil is a direct product of the social form of the dependent capitalist State, whose functioning, as demonstrated by Poulantzas (1978) and Gramsci (2011), consists of the material condensation of the correlation of forces between social classes in dispute. Therefore, EJA cannot be understood as an administrative arrangement, but as an organic part of the strategy of reproduction of bourgeois hegemony within the educational superstructure.

The Brazilian State was constituted as a racialized class State, marked by the structural exclusion of the poor and black population. Education, in this process, was no exception, but a key part of maintaining order. The school has historically operated as an

ideological apparatus of the State (ALTHUSSER, 1985), legitimizing inequalities and naturalizing the idea that the schooling of the working classes can be postponed, precarious or simply denied.

Thus, the very existence of EJA is an expression of the structural contradictions of the Brazilian social formation. EJA always appears as a residue, as a late, emergency and subordinate policy, never as a structuring policy for the universalization of education. This is explained because, according to Marini (1973, p.29), "Brazilian capitalism has not demanded, at any time in its history, the universal schooling of the workforce".

Also according to the author, the dynamics of dependent capitalism operates through the overexploitation of the labor force, which is sustained by low wages, long hours and low qualification of the working class. The schooling of adult workers, therefore, is not seen as a strategic investment, but as a superfluous cost.

Historically, we can divide EJA in Brazil into three periods, the first is the pre-1964 period, when adult education was considered as a moral tutelage, understood as an act of "civilization" of the popular classes, an idea aligned with the hygienist, racialized and moralizing discourse. The subjects were seen as "backward", "incapable", "not very productive" and, therefore, candidates for punctual, philanthropic and welfare programs. The second historical period of EJA is between 1964-1985, considered as an authoritarian technocratic education and pedagogy of order. The military dictatorship transformed EJA into an instrument of social control, articulated with the authoritarian developmental project. The Brazilian Literacy Movement (MOBRAL) expressed the pedagogy of adaptation and submission, denying any critical dimension. It is the pedagogical materialization of the authoritarian-capitalist State, where literacy becomes a technique of discipline. The third historical period of EJA in Brazil is the Post-1988, The 1988 Constitution inaugurates an ambivalent era, while affirming EJA as a right, the neoliberal State emerges restricting funding, privatizing, focusing policies and criminalizing poverty. The post-1988 EJA policy was shaped by the tension between an emancipatory project (Freire, social movements, popular educators), and a neoliberal project (managerial management, efficiency, goals, employability).

Currently, Youth and Adult Education is one of the main instruments of educational inclusion in Brazil, providing the resumption of studies for those who, for different reasons, were unable to complete schooling at the conventional age. This audience is composed of young people and adults with diverse life trajectories, who often face significant obstacles such as the need for work for family subsistence, socioeconomic difficulties and interruptions in the educational process.

The legal basis of EJA is guaranteed in the Federal Constitution of 1988 and consolidated by Law No. 9,394, of December 20, 1996 - Law of Guidelines and Bases of National Education (LDB), which recognizes EJA as an integral part of basic education, emphasizing that access to education is a right of all, without distinction of age or school history (Brasil, 1996).

However, as Ribeiro and Paiva (2021, p. 16) point out, "the effective implementation of this modality has been limited by structural problems and the prejudiced view that still persists in relation to its subjects and their social function". These challenges are rooted in discontinued public policies, insufficient funding, and lack of appreciation of educators and students in this type of education.

Historically, EJA has been linked to adult literacy initiatives, such as the National Literacy Plan (1964), interrupted by the military regime, and later to the Campaign for the Eradication of Illiteracy. From the 1990s onwards, the modality gained new impetus with initiatives such as the Literate Brazil Program and, more recently, in 2005, with the National Youth Inclusion Program (ProJovem), which aimed to combat school dropout and promote the social inclusion of young people between 18 and 29 years of age who had not completed elementary school (MEC, 2024).

As Arroyo (2005, p. 21) warns, "these policies often focus on education as a corrective mechanism, without considering the emancipatory and transformative potential that EJA can and should assume".

Decree No. 5,154, of July 23, 2004, regulates EJA, detailing the teaching modalities and the flexibility of methodologies, essential to meet the diversity of experiences and needs of students. The decree specifies that EJA must be offered with a pedagogical approach adapted to the conditions of time and pace of learning (Brasil, 2004).

In 2021, CNE/CEB Opinion No. 1 reinforced the need for youth and adult education to be designed specifically and adapted to the characteristics of this audience. The document recognizes that EJA should be more than a simple retrieval of academic content; it should be a tool for citizenship education, allowing students to develop cognitive, social, and political skills (Brasil, 2021).

Despite legislative advances, considerable challenges persist for EJA to effectively meet the needs of the public. Inequalities in access to education, especially in peripheral regions, still represent a significant obstacle. In these areas, the educational infrastructure is often precarious, with poorly equipped schools and a lack of skilled human resources.

According to data from the National Institute of Educational Studies and Research Anísio Teixeira (INEP), the dropout rate in EJA remains high, especially in the older age

groups, demonstrating the need for adjustments in the offer and teaching methodologies.

The challenges of EJA transcend pedagogical issues, involving economic and social factors that make it difficult for students to stay. Silva and Carvalho (2020, p. 781) find that:

More than 70% of EJA students face situations of social vulnerability, such as unemployment, informal work and lack of access to basic services, factors that compromise their educational trajectory. (Silva and Carvalho 2020, p. 781)

This reality is confirmed in the universe of the 17 EJA students of the Maria Evangelista Municipal School, where 8 are housewives with no income, 1 is unemployed and the remaining 8 have an income not exceeding one minimum wage, 7 of whom are informal workers and only 1 has a formal contract. Structural precariousness is also reflected in teacher training. Oliveira and Lima (2019, p. 574) point out that "there is a significant gap in the initial and continuing training of teachers who work in EJA, resulting in pedagogical practices that often do not dialogue with the realities of students".

Despite the challenges, EJA maintains significant potential to promote structural changes in Brazilian society, especially when articulated with other public policies. As Haddad (2022, p. 09) points out, "EJA is more than a compensatory policy; It is an inclusion strategy that can contribute to the reduction of social inequalities and the strengthening of democracy."

## **5 EJA IN THE MUNICIPALITY OF IMPERATRIZ/MA**

Imperatriz, as a medium-sized city in the Legal Amazon, expresses the typical contradictions of uneven urbanization. Unregulated urban expansion has produced a mosaic of territories marked by densely populated peripheries, structural economic informality, high rates of violence, and precariousness of public services.

From a critical Marxist point of view, the city is an example of what Harvey (2005) calls "accumulation by dispossession", urbanization advances on vulnerable populations, expelling them to the fringes of urban space, where the State arrives late or in a precarious way.

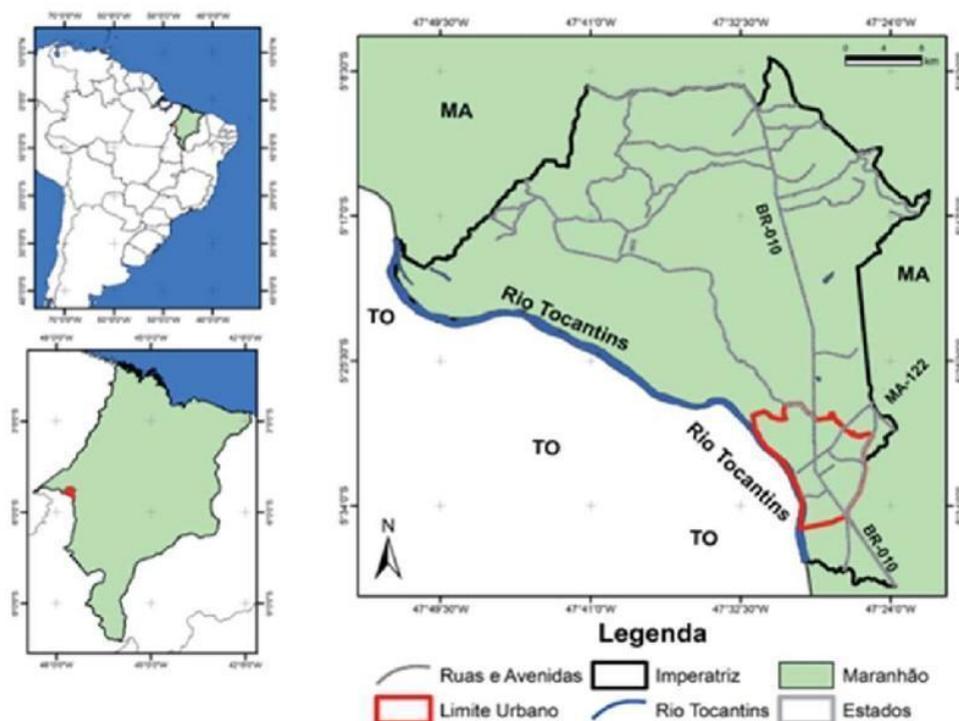
In this context, the EJA policy in Imperatriz is configured as a "residual policy" when EJA is treated as a supplementary program, not as part of the core of the educational system. Classes are closed, inadequate schedules are maintained and the infrastructure is deficient; as a "precarious policy", when schools located in the peripheries, such as the Maria Evangelista School, face issues such as lack of meals, absence of transportation, teaching overload, insufficient materials, unsafe night shifts and constant discontinuity; and as a "policy captured by neoliberal rationality", when, for example, The city government implements policies of targeting and accountability, shifting dropout to the individual sphere and making

invisible the material conditions that produce it.

The municipality of Imperatriz is located in the southwest region of Maranhão, with an estimated population of 285,146 inhabitants in 2024 (IBGE, 2024). According to data from the IBGE (2023), of the 138 elementary schools in the municipality, only 23 schools offer the EJA modality - 21 in the urban center and 2 in the rural area.

**Figure 1**

*Location of the municipality of Imperatriz – MA*



Source: Source: IBGE (2018); IMESC (2021); Santos et al. (2018).

The challenges in Youth and Adult Education are intensified in the urban peripheries, such as in the Itamagará neighborhood, where the Maria Evangelista Municipal School is located. The lack of continuity in the educational process is not only due to students' lack of interest, but reflects socioeconomic difficulties that directly affect school permanence.

The irregular attendance of students is revealed as a repetitive reality in the school researched. Many absences are related to the need for work to ensure family support, often leading to the abandonment of studies for survival.

The majority presence of women in EJA classes - 8 of the 17 students surveyed - highlights gender inequalities in the educational context. These women seek to balance their studies with the responsibilities of reproductive work and family care, facing the overload of domestic tasks without adequate support.

For these women, education represents an opportunity for transformation, but the

weight of daily responsibilities often prevents them from continuing their studies, putting education in the background to the urgent needs of the home.

Despite the adversities, there is a notorious enthusiasm and determination among the students, especially the older ones. The desire to complete elementary school and proceed to high school remains a central motivation in the search for better professional and life opportunities.

### 5.1 EJA AT THE MARIA EVANGELISTA SCHOOL

The research carried out with the 17 students of Youth and Adult Education reveals life stories that reflect not only the diversity of age and experiences, but also the challenges and aspirations of people who seek a new educational opportunity.

**Figure 2**

*Socioeconomic panorama of EJA students from the Maria Evangelista municipal school*

1	F	40	6/7 <sup>o</sup>	2	2024	FRIENDS	MY MOTHER HAS ALREADY STUDIED	6TH GRADE	WORK	LIFE DREAMS	I DON'T REMEMBER WHICH ONE	LEARN MORE	HOUSEWIFE	X
2	F	42	6/7 <sup>o</sup>	6	2022	MY SISTER WAS STUDYING	SISTER	3RD YEAR	VISION PROBLEMS	WILLINGNESS TO LEARN READ AND WRITE BETTER	NO	FOR ME IT'S GOOD BECAUSE I CAN STUDY AND WORK	DOMESTIC WORK	MY CARD IS NOT SIGNED
3	M	15	6/7 <sup>o</sup>	0	2024	FRIEND	NO	7 <sup>o</sup> I LEFT THE TRADITIONAL AND WENT TO THE NIGHT	I DIDN'T STOP	I was late	X	X	NO	X
4	M	22	6/7 <sup>o</sup>	0	2024	FRIENDSHIP	MY MOTHER STUDIES	6TH GRADE	LACK OF INTEREST, DISINTERESTED I HAD NO FOCUS AND STOPPED	WILLPOWER	NO	I WANT TO FINISH MY STUDIES AND BE SOMEONE IN LIFE	PRODUCTION FEEDER	SIGNED CONTRACT
5	M	38	6/7 <sup>o</sup>	0	2020	FRIEND	YES MY WIFE	I STUDIED UNTIL THE 1ST YEAR OF THE 2ND GRADE / (2005)	FAR SERVICE AND BUS	SEEK WORK IMPROVEMENTS	YES. IT HAD TO BE IN ALL MUNICIPAL SCHOOLS	GRADUATING AND GOING TO COLLEGE	YES, BRICKLAYER	INFORMAL
6	M	37	6/7 <sup>o</sup>	2	2024	RESEARCH	YES BROTHER	6TH GRADE	WORK	LEARN MORE	STUDYING IN ANOTHER NEIGHBORHOOD	ALWAYS LEARN	LEARNING	YES
7	M	15	8/9 <sup>o</sup>	0	2024	MY GRANDMOTHER	NO	8TH YEAR 2024	I LEFT THE REGULAR AND CONTINUED	HAD TO WORK	NO	TO WORK AND FINISH QUICKLY	REPLENISHER	MY CARD IS NOT SIGNED
8	F	X	8/9 <sup>o</sup>	3	2024	MARIA EVANGELISTA SCHOOL MANAGERS	YES MY MOTHER	8TH GRADE I STOPPED IN 2014	FINISH YOUR STUDIES AND SEEK LEARNING FOR THE JOB MARKET	NO	IT MAKES IT MUCH EASIER BECAUSE OF THE SCHEDULE	HOMEMAKER	INFORMAL	
9	M	16	8/9 <sup>o</sup>	0	2022	MOTHER	BROTHER STUDIED	6TH YEAR / 2022	I DIDN'T STOP	GET STARTED	NONE	FINISH FASTER	WORK IN A GROCERY STORE	INFORMAL
10	F	55	1/5 <sup>o</sup>	3	2024	CHURCH, FRIENDS, WHATSAPP GROUP, TEACHERS, I WAS ALREADY DOING IT IN ANOTHER CITY.	CHILDREN	4 <sup>o</sup>	RAISING SIBLINGS, EXPULSION, LIVING IN THE COUNTRYSIDE, TIME, WORK, 1ST CHILD, RAISING SIBLINGS.	TEACH THEIR CHILDREN, READ THE BIBLE, LEARN TO READ, READ AND WRITE, SIGN THEIR NAME, TAKE A BUS.	DISTANCE NEIGHBORING NEIGHBORHOODS	FINISH STUDIES, DIPLOMA, LEARN TO READ AND WRITE.	HOUSEWIFE	X
11	F	64	1/5 <sup>o</sup>	4	2022			I NEVER STUDIED					HOUSEWIFE	X
12	F	40	1/5 <sup>o</sup>	6	2024			5 <sup>o</sup>					HOTEL ATTENDANT	INFORMAL
13	F	30	1/5 <sup>o</sup>	5	2024			4 <sup>o</sup>					HOUSEWIFE	X
14	F	56	1/5 <sup>o</sup>	5	2024			I NEVER STUDIED					HOUSEWIFE	X
15	F	58	1/5 <sup>o</sup>	5	2022			DID FROM 0					HOUSEWIFE	X
16	F	46	1/5 <sup>o</sup>	8	2024			3 <sup>o</sup>					HOUSEWIFE	X
17	M	59	1/5 <sup>o</sup>	5	2022			1 <sup>o</sup>					RETIREE	INSS

Source: Fieldwork (2024).  
Organizer: SERAFIM, Tiago Silva Oliveira

The analysis of the socioeconomic data present in Figure 2, which gathers detailed information about the 17 EJA students of the Maria Evangelista Municipal School, reveals a set of structural determinations that not only explain the presence of these subjects in the modality, but expose, in a crystal clear way, the way in which the Brazilian social formation, dependent, racialized, patriarchal and territorially unequal, systematically produces and reproduces educational exclusion. The finding that 8 students do not have any income of their own, while 7 of the 8 who do have income work in informal occupations, is not an empirical coincidence; it is a direct expression of the logic of dependent capitalism (MARINI, 1973), in which the overexploitation of the labor force is not a deviation, but a structural component of accumulation. In this sense, the precariousness of labor identified in the picture is not a mere background of the school experience: it constitutes the very materiality that conditions, limits and, many times, makes permanence unfeasible.

The dialectical reading of these data requires understanding that EJA, as it appears in the school studied, is inscribed in the fundamental contradiction between work and time, with time being expropriated from workers in such an intense way that studying at night, after long hours, becomes an almost unsustainable effort. The predominance of informal workers reveals what Antunes (2018, p. 89) calls the "new morphology of the working class", marked by intermittence, lack of protection, and absence of rights. The impact of this on schooling is direct: informality prevents any long-term planning, and students report constant absences motivated by "odd jobs", domestic emergencies, child care or simple physical exhaustion. It is the materialization of what Lukács (1979) would call "life degraded by reification", in which the worker loses not only control over his production, but over his own existential time.

The situation of gender and race presented in Figure 2, predominance of black women, housewives with no income and mostly responsible for family care, reinforces the need for an intersectional reading, which is not a theoretical addition, but an analytical requirement incorporated into Latin American critical Marxism. As Gonzalez (1988) states, black women live a "triple historical journey", that is, economic exploitation, patriarchal oppression and racial subordination. This is clearly shown in the table: the fact that 8 women have no income and accumulate domestic work demonstrates how reproductive work, analyzed by Federici (2019) and Kergoat (2009), acts as an educational determinant, naturalized and invisible, but fundamental to understand dropout. These students do not absent themselves from school due to "lack of interest", but because they carry on themselves the maintenance of life, what Federici (2019) calls "invisible work", essential to capital, but unpaid and historically despised.

This insertion of women in reproductive work is directly connected to the point developed by Hirata (2010), according to which the sexual division of labor produces

educational inequalities throughout life, as it restricts women's temporal and energetic availability for training activities. The data in Figure 2 confirm this thesis, indicating that the late schooling of women in EJA is not an individual choice, but a result of socioeconomic and cultural conditions that limit access to formal education during childhood and youth.

Observing that 10 of the 17 students entered in 2024, the conjunctural dynamics of EJA is also perceived, subject to fluctuations in the labor market, intermittent government programs, and socioeconomic crises. Lefebvre (1991) already stated that the social space and, consequently, the school space, is produced by economic and political rhythms that condition the flows of people. Thus, the year 2024 may have functioned as a milestone for individual and collective reorganization, due to local changes, specific programs, or even the intensification of job insecurity. The table, although it does not specify the causes, evidences this dialectical relationship between the conjuncture and the search for education.

The desire expressed by the students to "improve their reading and writing", "complete their studies" or "get a better job", categories present in Figure 2, refers to the centrality of what Freire (1987, p. 43) calls "ontological hope". For Freire, the oppressed subject is not a mere object of history; He carried within himself the power of transformation. However, this hope is frustrated when there are no material conditions to sustain it. Frigotto (2010, p. 58) reinforces that the individual cannot be held responsible for failures that are an expression of social and structural determinations, because "school inequality is a direct consequence of social inequality".

Figure 2 reveals, in a striking way, the structural character of dropout in EJA. It is not a pedagogical problem, but a socioeconomic phenomenon. The reported absences and interruptions, motivated by childcare, exhaustion, lack of income, insecurity on the way, are objective expressions of what Gramsci (2011) would call "diffuse coercion", that is, forms of domination that are not expressed only by the direct violence of the State, but by the structural precariousness that prevents self-determination. In his analysis of hegemony, Gramsci argues that the state operates through the combination of coercion and consensus. In EJA, this coercion appears in the form of structural inequality that limits access to educational citizenship.

The territory also plays a fundamental role. The school is located in an area of urban vulnerability, with security problems, poor transportation and little presence of the State. This territorial condition reinforces Harvey's (2005) reading, according to which urban space in capitalism is produced in an unequal way, concentrating precariousness in popular neighborhoods. Figure 2 shows this spatial inequality when it is observed that students travel long distances in unsafe conditions, which directly affects their permanence.

Finally, the picture shows that EJA, as a public policy, is not politically neutral. It arises as a response to the historical failures of the educational system, already denounced by Saviani (2011), but remains weakened by budget cuts and the absence of integrated policies. By crossing income, gender, work and reasons for interruption, Figure 2 reveals that EJA cannot be understood as a "second chance", but as an expression of the class struggle in the educational field, in which historically excluded subjects compete for space to exist, learn and resist.

Thus, Figure 2 is not just a statistical tableau; it is a condensation of the historical, economic, social and political determinations that shape the lives of EJA student workers. It demonstrates that educational exclusion is an active production of capital, and permanence is a political act of resistance.

We can see that the year 2024 stands out in the survey, with 10 of the 17 participants starting the course this year. For many, the decision to return to school is directly linked to the desire to achieve previously interrupted goals, either due to the need to improve reading and writing, or due to a search for personal and professional development. Student 2, for example, expressed the desire to "read and write better", reflecting the importance of literacy in the daily lives of these people. Student 1, mother of two, highlighted the desire to learn more to be able to help her family, demonstrating how education becomes a tool for change for those who seek it.

The reasons for interrupting the studies were diverse, with a predominance of the need for work. Many interviewees, such as Student 5, reported having to stop studying to help support their families. Others, such as Students 3 and 7, faced the reality of reconciling work and study, which resulted in the delay of their training. Student 4, in turn, interrupted his studies due to lack of focus and interest, but found motivation to start over in EJA with the objective of "being someone in life". These accounts illustrate how adult life, with its responsibilities, often puts educational dreams in the background.

The motivation to resume her studies at EJA, however, is clear: the desire to change her life. For many, the goal transcends the completion of elementary or high school, aiming for a diploma that opens doors to new opportunities in the job market. Student 5, who works as a bricklayer, expressed ambition to attend higher education, a goal that seemed distant during the interruption of studies, but which becomes achievable through EJA. The search for qualification to improve living conditions and ensure a better future for her children is constant in the testimonies.

The reconciliation between studies, work and personal life presents itself as a significant challenge. Many students, such as Student 7, point to the lack of time as the main

obstacle, due to the need for work for subsistence. The difficulty of balancing responsibilities, added to the lack of transportation or distance to school – mentioned by Student 10 –, creates additional barriers to the educational process, reflecting the common reality among EJA students.

Another relevant fact is the predominance of informal work among students, which implies a lack of access to labor benefits and professional stability. Students 5 and 7, among others, cite informality as a limiting factor to growth opportunities. Thus, the contradiction faced by those who seek education as a form of social ascension, but come up against precariousness in the labor market, is evidenced.

Despite the challenges, the search for education represents a significant achievement. The flexibility of schedules offered by EJA facilitates the inclusion of students who otherwise would not be able to attend regular education. Student 8 highlighted that the possibility of studying at night is crucial, as the daily working day does not allow availability for studies in other shifts. This demonstrates the adaptation of EJA to the student reality, enabling the continuity of training without giving up family support.

## **6 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

The analysis developed throughout this study shows that Youth and Adult Education at the Maria Evangelista Municipal School constitutes an exemplary synthesis of the contradictions that structure the Brazilian social formation. Far from being a peripheral or residual policy, EJA appears as a privileged window to understand the interaction between economic structure, territorial dynamics, labor relations, racialized and patriarchal oppressions, and the concrete functioning of the State in contemporary times. The set of empirical data, especially those summarized in Figure 2, reveals that the school trajectory of EJA students cannot be explained from isolated pedagogical categories; on the contrary, it requires a rigorous reading that articulates totality, mediation and contradiction, according to the ontological tradition of historical-dialectical materialism.

The predominance of students marked by precarious employment relationships, low incomes, absence of social protection, exhausting working hours and accumulation of unpaid domestic work demonstrates that education, especially in EJA, is located within the concrete totality of social reproduction.

Youth and Adult Education (EJA) in Brazil remains a challenging field, dealing with a diverse and multifaceted audience. Historically, the modality has provided reintegration into the educational system to those who interrupted their studies in childhood or adolescence. However, unfavorable socioeconomic conditions and family responsibilities, evidenced in the

reality of Imperatriz, make access to and permanence in EJA constant obstacles. In the context of Maranhão, the scarcity of infrastructure, social inequality and economic pressure on families perpetuate a cycle of school dropout that is difficult to break. Education, a key potential for social transformation, loses priority in the face of the immediate needs of survival.

Imperatriz, like other Brazilian cities, reveals a scenario in which EJA mirrors regional and social contrasts. The irregular attendance of students, especially in the peripheries, reflects an unequal socioeconomic structure that imposes constant negotiation between study and work.

The data also demonstrate that educational exclusion has deep and persistent gender and race markers. The predominance of black women, many of them housewives with no income, reaffirms the thesis that colonial dehumanization, what Fanon (2008) called the "ontological destitution of the black subject", that is, continues to structure the concrete possibilities of life, free time and social recognition. Marxist feminist critical theory reinforces this understanding, Federici (2019) and Kergoat (2009) demonstrate that reproductive work, historically attributed to women, is a central mechanism for the reproduction of capital, even if it is carried out outside the paid spheres. The table in Figure 2 confirms this determination: women concentrate domestic care, accumulate income inequality and miss school due to overload of family responsibilities, making explicit the inseparability between reproductive work and educational inequality.

This scenario is also articulated with the territorial dimension of inequality. The school studied is located in an area marked by urban precariousness, insecurity, absence of public services and socioeconomic vulnerability. This spatiality is not contingent: as Harvey (2005) argues, urban space is one of the material expressions of class struggle, and its unequal production reflects the way wealth and poverty are organized. The analysis shows that the territory acts as a determining mediating category: long commutes, absence of adequate transportation, violence during the commute and lack of public lighting configure material barriers that operate as indirect mechanisms of school expulsion. Thus, the territory is not a neutral scenario of education: it is a constitutive part of the very condition of possibility of schooling.

EJA in Imperatriz, and in similar locations, cannot be treated as an isolated modality, but as part of an integrated set of public policies that address the multiple dimensions of students' lives. The flexibility of pedagogical methods, the offer of alternative schedules and psychological support are measures that facilitate student permanence. In addition, the implementation of social support programs – such as scholarships, food stamps and transportation – could ease the burden of responsibilities, especially on women, allowing

them to balance studies and family demands.

The strengthening of support networks for families, especially those overloaded by domestic and work tasks, is an essential strategy. Social assistance programs that include care spaces for children and the elderly during the school period can be fundamental to reduce dropout. The school, in turn, must be a welcoming environment, capable of recognizing and meeting student specificities, promoting inclusion that considers diversity of experiences and ages – which, in addition to reducing dropout, strengthens students' commitment to the educational process.

It is equally essential that the State invests in the continued training of EJA educators, guaranteeing them pedagogical and emotional tools to deal with student diversity and possible learning difficulties. Teachers must be prepared to adopt methodologies that respect students' times and rhythms, integrating theory and practice to make learning accessible and meaningful.

Thus, the research concludes that EJA in the Maria Evangelista School and, by extension, in similar contexts, can only fulfill its emancipatory role if its actions are articulated with a historical project that confronts the determinations of capital and affirms education as a right and as a practice of freedom. This implies recognizing that overcoming educational inequalities will only be possible through profound transformations in the social, economic and political structure of the country. Any EJA policy that is limited to the school environment will be doomed to frustration. Transformation requires confronting structural racism, the sexual division of labor, informality, economic dependence, and the neoliberal logic that dismantles rights.

In summary, EJA, as an instrument of inclusion and social transformation, demands a multifaceted and integrated approach. In the case of Imperatriz, it is imperative that public and educational policies adjust to local realities, promoting curricular flexibility, creating social support networks and strengthening school infrastructure. Education, as a fundamental right, must be understood as an opportunity for change, and only through articulation between different spheres of public power and society will it be possible to ensure that EJA students, especially in the urban peripheries, overcome barriers and carry out their life projects.

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