

From Social Vulnerability to Student Retention: Information Literacy as an "Antidote" to Academic Dropout

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that information literacy forms a structural "antidote" to dropout in Brazilian higher education, insofar as it addresses the multiple dimensions of academic vulnerability, understood as a particular expression of social vulnerability. The research is exploratory and bibliographic in nature, with references selected according to theoretical-conceptual relevance and alignment with the objectives of the article. The discussion and results indicate that academic vulnerability cannot be reduced to income insufficiency, as it encompasses an epistemic

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dimension (here identified as epistemic injustice) that remains neglected in institutional retention policies. The university library is considered one of the institutional spaces best positioned to operationalize this epistemic restitution, provided that librarians and information professionals move beyond passive service models and begin to integrate lifelong learning into academic reception processes, while also promoting the development of curricular partnerships with the faculty. Information literacy, in its critical, political, and emancipatory genesis, is regarded as a structural “antidote” to dropout, acting upon the mechanisms that fuel student abandonment and academic attrition. More than that, developing such literacy among more vulnerable students is not a matter of offering a complementary service: it is restoring their condition as legitimate epistemic subjects, which the symbolic violence of dominant social structures systematically denies them.

Keywords: Information Literacy; Social Vulnerability; Academic Vulnerability; University Dropout; Critical Librarianship; University Library

De la vulnerabilidad social a la permanencia estudiantil: la alfabetización informacional como “antídoto” para la deserción académica

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RESUMEN

Este artículo tiene como objetivo presentar la alfabetización informacional como un “antídoto” estructural para la deserción en la educación superior brasileña, en la medida en que actúa sobre las múltiples dimensiones de la vulnerabilidad académica, la cual es comprendida como una expresión particular de la vulnerabilidad social. La investigación es de naturaleza exploratoria-bibliográfica y recurre a una selección de referencias con pertinencia teórico-conceptual alineada con los objetivos del artículo. La discusión y los resultados indican que la vulnerabilidad académica no se reduce a la insuficiencia de ingresos, pues abarca una dimensión epistémica (aquí identificada como injusticia epistémica) que permanece desatendida en las políticas institucionales de permanencia. La biblioteca universitaria es considerada como uno de los espacios institucionales mejor posicionados para operacionalizar

esta restitución, siempre que las personas bibliotecarias trasciendan los modelos de servicio pasivo e integren el aprendizaje continuo en los procesos de acogida académica, articulando alianzas curriculares con el profesorado. La alfabetización informacional, en su génesis crítica, política y emancipatoria, actúa sobre los mecanismos que alimentan el abandono estudiantil. Desarrollarla en los estudiantes más vulnerables no es ofrecer un servicio complementario: significa restituirles la condición de sujetos epistémicos legítimos que la violencia simbólica de las estructuras sociales dominantes sistemáticamente les niega.

Palabras clave: Alfabetización informacional; Vulnerabilidad social; Vulnerabilidad académica; Deserción universitaria; Bibliotecología crítica; Biblioteca universitaria

INTRODUCTION

Information literacy occupies a prominent position in the field of Library and Information Science (LIS) that goes well beyond its technical dimension. Since the earliest formulations by Dudziak (2003), this meta-competence has been understood as a continuous process of internalizing the conceptual, attitudinal, and skill-based foundations necessary for critical interaction with the informational universe, a process that is, in its essence, inseparable from the social conditions in which subjects are situated. Recognizing this inseparability is the first step toward overcoming the instrumental view of information literacy and understanding it as a political, ethical, and emancipatory practice (Brisola and Romeiro 2018).

In this sense, education for information literacy, by stimulating critical and reflective thinking, contributes to the empowerment, autonomy, independence, and emancipation of individuals in society (Silva and Vitorino 2025). It constitutes a form of continuous learning that enables subjects to recognize their informational needs, to critically evaluate available sources, and to use information ethically and strategically, which, ultimately, is a condition for full citizenship in contemporary society. The development of critical information literacy matters to the discussion of the relations between information and citizenship from emancipatory perspectives that go beyond normative issues and consider social relations, given that citizenship is not built solely on material access to informational content but also encompasses the capacity for critical interpretation of reality and the construction of meaning at both individual and collective levels (Brisola and Romeiro 2018).

The emancipatory potential of information literacy, however, does not materialize automatically or neutrally. Critical information literacy demonstrates its relevance by serving either the reproduction of oppressive structures or their subversion, depending on the social and institutional conditions under which informational literacy is, or is not, promoted. This is precisely why information literacy cannot be neglected by governments and public policymakers: its development, or its absence, has direct consequences for the possibilities of democratic participation of different social groups, especially those historically deprived of access to formalized knowledge (Belluzzo 2018).

In the context of Brazilian higher education, this political dimension takes on a particularly urgent character. The expansion of university access over recent decades has incorporated into the academic environment students of popular origin who arrive at the institution with informational trajectories marked by scarcity, most of whom have not been previously socialized in the practices of reading, writing, and critical source evaluation that the university presupposes without teaching. This scenario is reflected in dropout data: the expansion of access to higher education in Brazil has not been accompanied, in equal proportion, by student retention, with cumulative dropout rates reaching 64.7% in the private sector and 68.1% in distance education modalities over the 2020 to 2024 cycle (Semesp 2026). Dropout rates are higher among young students, low-income students, and non-white students, confirming the decisive influence of social and institutional factors (Nierotka, Salata, and Martins 2023), evidencing that student withdrawal is not a simple individual phenomenon but rather a structural and multifactorial issue.

It is clear, however, that Brazilian higher education expanded its doors without transforming its practices. By presupposing, without teaching, the informational skills that structure academic life and everyday life more broadly, such as evaluating sources, developing argumentation or engaging in critical thinking, the university imposes on students a burden that is not technical but epistemic. Fricker (2007) offers the precise concept to name this phenomenon: epistemic injustice, understood as the harm suffered by someone specifically in their capacity as a knowing subject. It is a form of structural violence that does not announce itself as such: it presents itself as meritocracy, as assessment, as failure, as segregation, deciding who belongs and who does not belong to the territory of academic knowledge, and directly fueling the cycle of dropout (Fricker 2007).

To empower, in this context, connotes action and political responsibility: the information-literate subject becomes an active agent, capable of self-expression, of claiming rights, and of critically engaging with the world from their own perspective, which is precisely what the pedagogy of Paulo Freire (1996, 2013) designates as *conscientization*. Emancipatory pedagogy in information literacy education therefore

implies recognizing that informational literacy is, simultaneously, a political act of resistance to exclusion and a device for restoring the epistemic health of students who arrive at the university already marked by social vulnerability (Dudziak 2011). University libraries and their information professionals, within this framework, cease to be mere spaces of instrumental support for research and become institutional agents of epistemic justice, and by extension, of student retention and emancipation in higher education.

With this in mind, the general objective of this article is to present information literacy as a structural “antidote” to dropout in Brazilian higher education, insofar as it addresses the multiple dimensions of academic vulnerability, itself understood as a particular expression of social vulnerability. The term *antidote* is employed here as a deliberate theoretical metaphor: just as an antidote acts upon the mechanisms of a specific harm rather than merely treating its symptoms, information literacy, in its critical and emancipatory dimension, is understood as an intervention that operates upon the structural roots of epistemic deprivation, rather than offering compensatory or palliative responses. The aim is not, therefore, to frame this literacy as an auxiliary pedagogical resource, but to recognize it as a condition of retention, epistemic dignity, and university citizenship. The guiding question of this article is: In what ways can information literacy operate as an institutional policy of epistemic justice and as a tool for combating dropout?

To this end, this article seeks, through an exploratory bibliographic review, to discuss, reflect upon, and propose necessary inflections regarding information literacy in the context of the academic vulnerability of undergraduate students in Brazilian higher education. It draws on a theoretical-conceptual framework that mobilizes the sociology of social vulnerability, the theory of intellectual affiliation, Freirean critical pedagogy, the philosophy of epistemic injustice, and the foundations of information literacy in the Brazilian context, with a view to arguing that this literacy constitutes a structural “antidote” to dropout and an inescapable condition of student retention, epistemic dignity, and university citizenship.

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The research that resulted in this article was exploratory and bibliographic in nature. Exploratory because it aimed to elucidate and deepen concepts and ideas in order to formulate more precise problems and establish theoretical foundations for subsequent investigations, a characteristic that applies directly to the results achieved in this work, given the still emerging nature of the articulation between information literacy and academic vulnerability in the Brazilian literature (Prodanov and Freitas 2013).

Bibliographic research, for its part, is concerned with establishing a rigorous theoretical foundation based on the critical reading and systematic analysis of existing literature, enabling the researcher to identify convergences, gaps, and tensions within a given field of knowledge (Prodanov and Freitas 2013). It is through this method that the researcher becomes acquainted with the theoretical dimension of the research theme and constructs the argumentative framework of the work (Silva, Oliveira, and Silva 2021). Within the scope of an exploratory bibliographic approach, the analytical movement is not one of hypothesis testing or empirical data collection, but of conceptual construction and theoretical proposition, which is precisely the nature of the contribution this article seeks to offer.

The analysis was conducted through the selection of documents and works published on the core themes of the study, with technical procedures guided by a non-probabilistic, judgement-based approach, in which the researcher selects the corpus considered most valid and representative for the research objectives (Prodanov and Freitas 2013).

The bibliographic review was carried out by selecting both classical references relevant to the inherent themes and works retrieved from the Web of Science, Scopus, and SciELO databases, based on searches directed at the topics of information literacy, academic vulnerability, epistemic injustice, higher education dropout, and informational literacy. The searches were conducted without temporal restriction, prioritizing works in Portuguese, English, and Spanish, with no predefined limit on the number of documents. Although Redalyc was not systematically searched as a primary database, works indexed in that platform and relevant to the study were incorporated whenever they appeared in the reference lists of retrieved documents or were already part of the authors' established theoretical repertoire in the field of Brazilian and Latin American information science. Inclusion criteria were of theoretical-conceptual relevance and in direct alignment with the objectives of the article; works of marginal thematic scope or of a strictly empirical and methodological nature were excluded.

The search and initial screening process yielded approximately 80 potentially relevant references, from which a selected corpus of works was retained for systematic reading and integration into the argument, based on their theoretical density and direct relevance to the core themes of the study. The analytical procedure applied to the selected corpus was that of thematic and argumentative analysis: each work was read in full and mapped according to its conceptual contributions to one or more of the core themes of the study, namely social vulnerability, academic vulnerability, epistemic injustice, information literacy, and university dropout. Conceptual convergences and tensions among the sources were identified and organized into the argumentative structure of the article, allowing the theoretical framework to be built inductively from the literature rather than imposed upon it.

DISCUSSION AND CONSTRUCTION OF MEANINGS

Social Vulnerability: Conceptual Foundations and Structural Dimension

Analyses of academic failure, dropout, or exclusion in higher education should begin by refusing the most immediately available and ideologically convenient temptation: that of treating these phenomena as expressions of incapacity, laziness, or individual choice by those who experience them. This reading, disseminated both by common sense and by certain technicist approaches to educational management, serves a precise political function: to naturalize exclusion, converting structural and multifactorial inequalities into personal deficits and exempting institutions from any responsibility for the processes that produce this abandonment. To break with this dissimulation, it is necessary to anchor the discussion in a more adequate theoretical ground, namely the sociology of social vulnerability.

The concept of *social vulnerability* is not, in its most rigorous formulation, a fixed attribute of certain groups or individuals. It is, rather, a relational and dynamic concept that describes intermediate and unstable states between integration and exclusion within a given social order. Castel (1998) offers a precise and influential formulation of this concept by proposing, in his analysis of the metamorphoses of the social question, a model for distributing individuals into zones of social cohesion. The author states that there is a deep and historically determined correlation between the place occupied by the individual in the social division of labour and their participation in networks of sociability and social protection systems. From this correlation derive three structural zones: the zone of integration, marked by stable employment and solid social and relational ties; the zone of vulnerability, characterized by precarious employment and the weakening of proximity bonds; and the zone of disaffiliation, corresponding to the simultaneous absence of productive insertion and relational support, what the author calls double disqualification, or economic and social disqualification (Castel 1998).

What distinguishes Castel's contribution from static approaches to exclusion, and what makes his model particularly fruitful for the field of education, is the processual and dynamic character attributed to vulnerability. Vulnerability is not a permanent state in which certain subjects are naturally trapped; it is an intermediate and unstable zone that combines the precariousness of material living conditions and the fragility of proximity social supports. It is a position that is always uncertain, always subject to slippage: both toward integration, when conditions stabilize and supports strengthen, and toward disaffiliation, when ties break and resources are exhausted. This dynamic perspective is fundamental to the argument of this article: academic vulnerability is not an arrival condition but a complex and ongoing process, which the university can either interrupt or deepen, depending on the institutional policies it adopts or refuses to adopt (Castel 1998).

Castel's framework is complemented, for the purposes of this article, by the sociology of education of Pierre Bourdieu (1979, 1989, 1998, 2007), which offers precise analytical instruments for understanding how social inequalities of origin translate into academic inequalities within the school field. Bourdieu elucidates that the school is not an impartial institution that selects the most talented based on objective criteria. On the contrary, it fulfils the fundamental role of legitimizing social inequalities by concealing their social bases and converting them into academic and cognitive differences that appear, on the surface, to be related to individual merits and talents (Nogueira and Nogueira 2002).

The central mechanism of this operation is the concept of *cultural capital*: the school presupposes certain competences that are, in fact, acquired within the family sphere and the individual's social environment, and evaluates students based on these presupposed competences without systematically teaching them (Bourdieu and Passeron 2014). Students from families with high cultural capital arrive at school and, later, at university, already in possession of the dispositions, tastes, and ways of speaking and writing that the school field values. Students of popular origin typically arrive without these dispositions, which the school reads as incapacity or lack of effort, when in reality it is merely a difference in cultural heritage (Bourdieu 1998; Bourdieu and Passeron 2014).

This ideological operation is sustained by what Bourdieu (1989, 1998) called *symbolic violence*: the coercion exercised not by physical force, but by the recognition and adherence that the dominated grants to the dominant when, in order to think about themselves and their relation to the world, they have access only to instruments of knowledge they share with the dominant, instruments that make the relation of domination appear as natural, legitimate, and deserved (Bourdieu 1998). The greatest effect of the symbolic violence exercised by the school over popular classes is not the simple loss of family culture, but the recognition, by members of these very classes, of the superiority and legitimacy of the dominant culture, which translates into the devaluation of popular knowledge and into a relation of inferiority that the student carries into the university as invisible baggage of origin (Bourdieu 1998; Nogueira and Nogueira 2002).

Bourdieu (1989, 1998) argues that individuals, through their choices and actions, reproduce social institutions, yet not consciously, but rather by reproducing habits and customary conducts. The *habitus* is history transformed into nature, acting as an external interference that becomes part of individuals. Through *habitus*, individuals adopt as their own the choices made by the collective subject that have been typified. It establishes a system of internalized dispositions that orient practices and representations, the product of each individual's history, generating practices conforming to the conditions of existence from which they emerged (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Zwan and Nogueira 2025). Students of popular

origin therefore arrive at the university with a habitus formed in contexts distant from the dominant academic culture, and the university, by demanding without teaching the dispositions it presupposes, converts this difference in habitus into measurable academic disadvantage: difficulty in understanding academic dynamics, lack of support networks, and the absence of resources that foster student retention, all of which reinforce academic vulnerability.

Academic Vulnerability: From Social Origin to University Expression

The notion of *academic vulnerability* emerges precisely from the need to name the process by which inequalities of origin, inherited from the social, economic, and cultural conditions of departure, are reactualized and take specific forms within the territory of higher education. It is not an autonomous phenomenon inaugurated at the moment of enrolment; it is the continuation, under new guises and in new territory, of a social vulnerability that the student had already carried well before arriving at the university (Palavezzini 2021).

Academic vulnerability cannot be reduced to income insufficiency: it presupposes a multidimensional character that highlights limitations in relation to access, retention, and completion of higher education, based on the interaction of structural, objective, and subjective factors, grounded in the interrelation of economic, social, health-related, and academic elements, among others (Palavezzini and Alves 2020). This multidimensionality is decisive: it prevents the reduction of the issue to the financial dimension and compels institutional managers to consider that students may be economically assisted and academically vulnerable at the same time, because the epistemic competences necessary for university life are not distributed by quota policies or retention grants. In other words, they depend on cultural trajectories of formation that, in Brazil, remain radically unequal (Palavezzini and Alves 2020).

Evidencing the multidimensionality of academic vulnerability is essential to avoid simplifications that reduce the issue solely to income status: despite the fact that economic factors are decisive for student retention in higher education, there is a chain of variables that influence, directly and indirectly, academic life (Palavezzini and Alves 2020). Among these dimensions, the informational one, expressed in the absence of skills to search, evaluate, select, and critically use scientific information, is one of the most invisible and least addressed by institutional student assistance policies, which tend to concentrate efforts on the material aspects of retention, leaving the epistemic and informational dimension in the background (Palavezzini 2021).

Dropout data confirm that Brazilian universities continue to produce, on a large scale, the academic disaffiliation of the most vulnerable students. The cumulative

dropout rate among students who entered in 2013 reached 58% over a decade of follow-up (INEP 2024), meaning that more than one and a half million students abandoned their courses without completing them. This figure is not homogeneously distributed across social groups: dropout is strongly associated with variables such as race, income, and accumulated academic performance, with Black students presenting systematically higher dropout risks than white students, even when other variables are controlled (Lopes et al. 2023). Dropout is higher among young students, low-income students, and non-white students, confirming that social and institutional factors weigh decisively on retention or abandonment (Nierotka, Salata, and Martins 2023).

Understanding dropout, therefore, requires shifting the gaze from the student who withdraws to the structure that abandons the student, and it is precisely this shift that the concept of academic vulnerability, grounded in Castel's theory of social vulnerability and Bourdieu's sociology of education, makes possible. This perspective resonates with the international literature on student retention and persistence, which has long identified institutional integration, social belonging, and academic engagement as decisive factors in whether students remain or withdraw.

Tinto's (1987) foundational model of student departure emphasizes that dropout results from a failure of integration into the academic and social systems of the institution, rather than from individual inadequacy. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) have demonstrated, across decades of longitudinal research, that the experiences of students within the institution, including access to academic support, peer interaction, and faculty contact, account for a substantial portion of the variance in persistence. Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement further underscores that the quantity and quality of students' engagement with institutional resources directly predicts their educational outcomes. Braxton (2000) extends these frameworks by emphasizing the role of institutional culture and classroom practices in shaping the sense of belonging of students. Together, these contributions converge on a central insight: retention is not merely a financial or administrative matter, but a deeply relational and epistemic one, which is precisely the argument this article seeks to develop within the Brazilian context.

Epistemic Injustice: The Invisible Dimension of Academic Dropout

If academic vulnerability is the form that social vulnerability takes within the university, there is a dimension of this phenomenon that remains systematically invisible in debates about student retention and dropout in higher education: the epistemic dimension. The literature on dropout has advanced considerably in identifying economic, institutional, and psychosocial factors associated with course abandonment. However, little attention is given to another fundamental

question: What does it mean, for a student of popular origin, not to have been previously socialized in the ways of knowing, writing, and positioning oneself that the university takes for granted and as natural? This question, uncomfortable precisely because it shifts responsibility from the student to the structure, finds answers in contemporary epistemological philosophy, more specifically in the concept of *epistemic injustice* proposed by Miranda Fricker (2007).

Epistemic injustice designates a specific type of moral harm: that suffered by someone specifically in their capacity as a knowing subject, a harm, therefore, to a capacity essential to human value (Fricker 2007, 1). It is a form of injustice that operates within the domain of everyday epistemic practices, in exchanges of knowledge, in processes of credibility attribution, in the forms of understanding and interpreting social experience, and whose effect is to deprive certain subjects of the minimum conditions for functioning fully as producers and evaluators of knowledge. Fricker (2007) distinguishes two fundamental forms of this injustice, both with direct consequences for the academic trajectories of vulnerable students.

The first is *testimonial injustice*, which occurs when prejudice or bias causes a given subject to receive reduced credibility in their utterances, when what the student says, writes, or produces is systematically undervalued not for its content, but because of markers of class, race, or accent that diminish, in the eyes of the institution, their authority as a producer of knowledge. In the university environment, it manifests whenever a professor interprets the truncated writing of a student of popular origin as a sign of intellectual incapacity, without identifying in it the sign of a structural cultural deprivation; whenever the voice of a peripheral student is disqualified in academic debates for not mastering the technical vocabulary or formal register the field demands; whenever the intellectual production of students from historically marginalized groups is evaluated by criteria constructed without their participation and reflecting the tastes and competences of the dominant classes (Fricker 2007; Nogueira and Nogueira 2002).

The second form is *hermeneutical injustice*, which operates at an even more structural level: it occurs when a gap in the collective interpretive resources disadvantages someone in terms of understanding their own social experience (Fricker 2007). Members of marginalized groups are regularly prevented from participating fully and equally in the social practices through which collective interpretive resources are generated and made public, which prevents them from understanding, naming, and communicating their own experience of exclusion within the university (Bhakuni and Abimbola 2021).

In the informational context, this form of injustice can become particularly devastating: not knowing what a scientific database is, lacking the tools to distinguish a reliable source from a pseudo-scientific one, not possessing the conceptual categories to name what one feels when reading and not understanding a text,

all of this materializes hermeneutical injustice operating silently over trajectories that already arrived at the university fragile. The student, faced with this, does not abandon the course for lack of intelligence or effort; they abandon because they were deprived, throughout their entire prior trajectory, of the interpretive and informational resources that make it possible to inhabit the territory of academic knowledge with legitimacy (Bhakuni and Abimbola 2021).

Dotson (2011, 2014) radicalizes and expands Fricker's framework by introducing the concepts of *epistemic violence* and *epistemic oppression*, which make it possible to articulate epistemic injustice with broader structures of domination. Epistemic violence consists in the failure, motivated by pernicious ignorance, of listeners to respond to speakers' vulnerabilities in linguistic exchanges (Dotson 2011, 236-237), a formulation that applies precisely to what occurs when university professors respond to the writing, argumentation, or research difficulties of vulnerable students with failure and indifference, without identifying in these difficulties the sign of a structural deprivation that the institution itself contributed to produce.

Epistemic oppression, in turn, refers to the persistent exclusion of marginalized groups from the production and validation of knowledge, and this is precisely what the university practises, often without intention, when it demands competences and behaviours it never taught (Dotson 2014, 115). In its most irreducible form, epistemic oppression is that in which the knowledge system itself intrinsically values certain forms of knowing and intellectual production over others, placing members of marginalized groups at an intractable disadvantage: it is not enough to open the doors of the university if its epistemic practices continue to reproduce, now from within, the same dominant hierarchies that operated from without (Dotson 2014, 115).

The exclusion of certain knowledge domains at any curricular level can lead to epistemic injustice, and the absence of the development of critical awareness and lifelong learning in the educational trajectories of students of popular origin is precisely one of these exclusions, as it defines limits and constrains learning (Babu et al. 2025). This exclusion silently defines who has the epistemic conditions to remain at the university and who does not, not by merit or capacity, but by differential access to the tools that make academic life possible. The promotion of epistemic disparities obstructs trust and collaboration within educational communities, undermining the sense of belonging essential to effective learning environments, where equitable participation in the production and consumption of knowledge constitutes the materialization of epistemic justice (Babu et al. 2025).

The available data confirm the gravity and selectivity of this phenomenon: students who participate in public inclusion policies present systematically higher completion rates, with 51% of quota students in the federal network completing

their degree, compared to 41% of non-quota students, and 58% of ProUni (Program University for All) beneficiaries completing their undergraduate degree, compared to 36% of non-beneficiaries (INEP 2024). These figures do not express differences in talent or effort: they express differences in access to material, relational, and epistemic resources, which the university rarely distributes equitably. Explicit institutional support reduces dropout because it supplies, at least partially, deficits that the trajectory of origin could not supply, which reveals, a contrario sensu, that without such support the chances of retention for socially vulnerable students are structurally lower.

Dropout, consequently, should not be read as a mere statistical datum, but as a latent expression of structural inequalities that evidence the underrepresentation of historically marginalized groups and the insufficiency of policies that, in guaranteeing access, leave the question of epistemic belonging untouched (Lopes et al. 2023). Understanding dropout through this lens implies recognizing that academic failure cannot be reduced to individual issues but must be understood in light of a system that perpetuates inequality and marginalization, favouring those who already possess the cultural capital adequate to institutional expectations and neglecting those who come from more socially vulnerable contexts (Patto 2022). The university that presupposes without teaching the learn-to-learn skills that structure academic life is not a neutral institution that assesses talent: it is an institution that reproduces, under the guise of meritocracy, the social hierarchy of origin of its students and, in doing so, transforms dropout from an individual phenomenon into a structural act of social and epistemic segregation (Patto 2022).

It is at this point that information literacy emerges not as a complementary pedagogical resource, but as a movement suited to interrupting the reproductive cycle of social vulnerability within the university. Before proceeding, it is necessary to clarify three main concepts that structure the argument developed throughout this article and that recur in its conclusions. By *epistemic health*, the authors propose, drawing on Fricker (2007, 1) and Dotson (2011, 236-237), the condition in which a subject possesses the interpretive, evaluative, and communicative resources necessary to function fully and autonomously as a producer and consumer of knowledge within the academic field, a condition that is neither natural nor spontaneous, but socially constructed and institutionally mediated. By *epistemic restitution*, the authors understand, grounded in Fricker (2007) and Dudziak (2003, 28), the active process through which institutions, particularly university libraries, return to historically deprived subjects the epistemic tools and resources that structural inequalities denied them, going beyond mere access to information to encompass the development of the critical competences that make that access meaningful. And by *legitimate epistemic subject*, following Fricker's (2007) framework, the article designates the subject who is recognized,

both by themselves and by others, as a credible and authoritative producer of knowledge within a given epistemic community, a condition that epistemic injustice systematically withholds from students of popular origin, and that critical information literacy seeks to restore.

Moreover, if epistemic injustice operates by depriving certain subjects of the tools they need to function fully as producers and evaluators of knowledge, then the development of information literacy is, in a precise sense, an act of restoration of epistemic and social justice and a mechanism for combating dropout that acts upon one of its densest and least discussed causes. It is not a matter of offering a complementary resource to those who have already been excluded: it is a matter of restoring to historically deprived subjects the capacity to inhabit the territory of academic knowledge with legitimacy, autonomy, and dignity, which is what Paulo Freire (2013) called conscientization, the process by which the subject moves from being an object of the narrative to becoming its protagonist, and for which critical and emancipatory information literacy is an inescapable condition.

Information Literacy as an “Antidote” to University Dropout: Constructing Meanings Through Emancipation and Critical Thinking

In the face of the reality of societies marked by deep historical asymmetries, such as Brazil, traversed by colonialism, structural violences, and class inequality, the need for information about and for the groups that have been, and continue to be, neglected and subalternized in their cultures, their knowledge, and their ways of knowing is indisputable. Despite the growing advances in terms of access to information in higher education, through the expansion of enrolments and the proliferation of digital repositories and databases, this phenomenon is profoundly questionable for those who, historically, are still excluded not only from physical access to information, but from the cultural and epistemic conditions that make such access meaningful (Righetto, Karpinski, and Vitorino 2021).

Access to information is directly related to the development of skills and competences that enable its conscious, creative, and beneficial use. Information is a constitutive element of a group's culture and, in its essence, is both a condition of permanence and an instrument of change (Vitorino and Piantola 2020). For this potential to be realized, however, it must be recognized that citizenship is not built solely on material access to information: subjects are also required to possess the capacity for critical interpretation of reality and the construction of meaning from their lived and experienced contexts (Branch 2019). A student of popular origin who enters the university without having been previously socialized in the informational practices of the academic field is not a well-informed student who merely lacks technical guidance: they are a subject who has been deprived, throughout

their entire trajectory, of the interpretive tools that make it possible to inhabit the territory of university knowledge. This deprivation, as demonstrated in the preceding sections, is structurally produced and politically sustained.

The need to develop information literacy is therefore clear, a concept that has been employed from various approaches and understandings (Vitorino and Piantola 2020). The origins of information literacy as a formally articulated concept date to 1974, when Paul Zurkowski (1974) first introduced the term in his landmark report to the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science. The concept was subsequently consolidated in the foundational definition of the American Library Association (ALA n.d.), which characterized the information-literate person as one capable of finding, evaluating, and using information effectively in problem-solving and decision-making. This formulation, while historically significant, is today widely recognized as insufficient, precisely because it circumscribes information literacy to a set of technical skills, detached from questions of power, context, and social meaning.

However, more recent and comprehensive understandings have substantially broadened this conceptual horizon. The Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (MacDonald 2018) defines information literacy as the ability to think critically and make balanced judgements about any information we find and use, recognizing that it encompasses not only competences but also ethical dispositions, civic engagement, and reflexive awareness of one's own knowledge practices. The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL 2015), in turn, replaced its earlier checklist-based standards with a Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education structured around six threshold concepts, foregrounding inquiry, scholarship as conversation, and authority as constructed and contextual, thereby acknowledging the situated and relational nature of knowledge production. This notion proves reductionist when one considers that information itself constitutes a tool of power, for inclusion or for oppression, while also possessing complex levels of personal and collective meaning. The social movement of information literacy thus goes beyond the mere assembly of skills to access and appropriately employ information: it is a sociopolitical competence essential to the construction and maintenance of democratic societies, in which people make conscious choices and are capable of determining the course of their own lives (Righetto, Karpinski, and Vitorino 2021; Walton and Cleland 2017).

Insofar as information literacy operates within a sociopolitical context, it is also politically directed, and by limiting its potential to technicist norms and guidelines, without the participation of people, communities, and contexts, one risks minimizing or even denying the inherently political nature of information literacy (Jacobs 2008). Elmborg (2006) proposes for information literacy an alternative similar to that postulated by Paulo Freire for pedagogy,

which is the need to develop in people a critical consciousness in relation to reality and to themselves, centred on the posing and solving of problems, so that control of life can be developed alongside other aspects such as autonomy, being, feeling, and learning itself. This orientation resonates directly with the central argument developed here: information literacy, in its critical dimension, is precisely the instrument through which the epistemic injustice suffered by students can be interrogated, named, and progressively overcome.

Dudziak (2011), in seeking the foundations of an emancipatory pedagogy in education for sustainable information literacy, recognizes that the pedagogy of information literacy leads to the emancipation of the student as a user and producer of information, emancipation being the central objective of the process. Freire (1996, 2013) argued that the act of learning is not and should not be neutral since it can reproduce submission or produce conscientization. The banking conception of education denies dialogue: the educator is the one who speaks the word, the learners are those who docilely listen, and the educator deposits content into their heads, as if they were receptacles to be filled (Freire 1996, 2013). This education is not liberatory but oppressive, for it does not seek the conscientization of its learners.

Liberatory and problem-posing education, by contrast, cannot be the act of depositing, narrating, or transferring knowledge and values to passive learners: it must be a cognitive act of praxis, of action, and of reflection on the world (Freire 1996, 2013). While banking education maintains the educator-learner contradiction, serving domination, problem-posing education achieves the overcoming of that contradiction, serving liberation. This is precisely the horizon toward which a critical and subversive information literacy must point: the focus is not on training students in the use of search tools, but on forming thinking subjects capable of interrogating the conditions of knowledge production, of identifying the power relations that organize the informational field, and of positioning themselves critically in relation to them.

Vitorino and Piantola (2011, 2020) proposed a theorization of the four dimensions of information literacy that allows for a comprehensive understanding of its political and philosophical scope: the technical dimension, related to the skills and instruments for finding, evaluating, and using information appropriately; the aesthetic dimension, derived from the subjectivity implicit in the reception and transmission of informational content; the ethical dimension, which represents the responsible use of information and aims at the realization of the common good; and the political dimension, which encompasses the exercise of citizenship, participation in decisions and transformations pertaining to social life, and the capacity to see beyond the surface of discourse, recognizing that information is produced from power relations that need to be interrogated (Vitorino and Piantola 2011, 2020).

These dimensions are responsible for articulating information literacy with the understanding of epistemic justice. Worked on together, they are capable of promoting the means by which the individual recognizes that information is organized in a way that silences certain groups and privileges others, understanding this dynamic and overcoming such barriers, which is, in precise terms, the inversion of the mechanism of hermeneutical injustice (Fricker 2007). Information literacy, as a movement, must promote the emancipation and critical thinking of people in society, and developing its dimensions in students is, therefore, to restore to them the interpretive resources that have been denied: the capacity to recognize the power structures that organize the field of academic knowledge, to identify their own informational needs, and to produce information that is simultaneously academically legitimate and politically situated.

Brisola and Romeiro (2018) discuss the role of information literacy as a practice of resistance, understanding that the information-literate subject is one capable of recognizing their informational needs, seeking reliable sources, accessing and critically analyzing information, distinguishing between the relevant and the irrelevant, contextualizing and hierarchizing information, using it, and producing new information, thereby enabling resistance to the scenario of disinformation and the promotion of themselves as citizens who, amid the flood of information, are capable of critically selecting those that are important to them.

This formulation has direct implications for the context of academic vulnerability: a student of popular origin who develops information literacy ceases to be a passive object of an academic culture that silences them and becomes an active subject capable of interrogating, contesting, and enriching it with their own perspective. In this line of thinking, it is worth asking: How is information literacy being developed, and in which spaces? What pedagogical orientations predominate in its application? How do contextual and institutional conditions affect its formation patterns? What content is taught, who created it, for what purposes, and for whom? From what ideological locus was the content to be taught configured? How might a pedagogy of information literacy be configured that would not reproduce or subalternize knowledges and subjectivities, but would instead position itself from social, liberatory, and popular perspectives? (Righetto, Karpinski, and Vitorino 2021). These questions are not rhetorical; they depict the map of a political and pedagogical agenda that university libraries and student assistance systems urgently need to assume.

The realization of information literacy as a structural “antidote” to academic vulnerability necessarily involves a revision of the role that the university library plays within the institution. The library occupies a singular position, given that it is the main institutional space that potentially serves all students regardless of their field of study, course, year of enrolment, or socioeconomic condition. This

universality of access confers upon the library a responsibility that no other institutional device possesses: that of constituting itself as a space for social and epistemic reception and for the development of lifelong learning for all, with special attention to those whose trajectories of origin did not provide them with the informational socialization that university life demands. University libraries and librarians, by assisting in the formation process, operate in two fundamental respects, which include technical-professional formation and the formation of critical, plural, and ethical citizens (Santos and Mata 2023).

For the university library to effectively constitute itself as an agent of retention and epistemic justice, it is necessary that its role in the formation of information literacy cease to be passive, waiting for students to arrive with an already formulated informational demand, and become proactive by identifying the most vulnerable groups from the beginning of academic life, integrating development programmes into the reception processes for first-year students, articulating partnerships with faculty for the insertion of information literacy into curricula, and building, together with the students themselves, the competences that will allow them to inhabit the territory of academic knowledge with autonomy, critical awareness, and dignity. This means recognizing the librarian as a first-order educational agent, not as an auxiliary to research, but as an educator committed to the formation of subjects capable of lifelong learning (Dudziak 2003).

As a result of the discussion developed so far, *figure 1* synthesizes the central argument of the article, organizing it into two interconnected movements. The first, represented in the upper half of the diagram, illustrates the cycle of reproduction of inequality in higher education based on the key concepts discussed throughout the text. The second movement, represented in the lower half, proposes the structural “antidote” to this cycle: critical and emancipatory information literacy, understood in its four integrated dimensions, mediated by the university library as an institutional space of epistemic justice and by the librarian as educator and information mediator, oriented toward a result that transcends the simple retention of enrolments. In this sense, student retention should be acknowledged as a political act, expressed in epistemic health, belonging, intellectual affiliation, and the formation of legitimate epistemic subjects and full citizens.

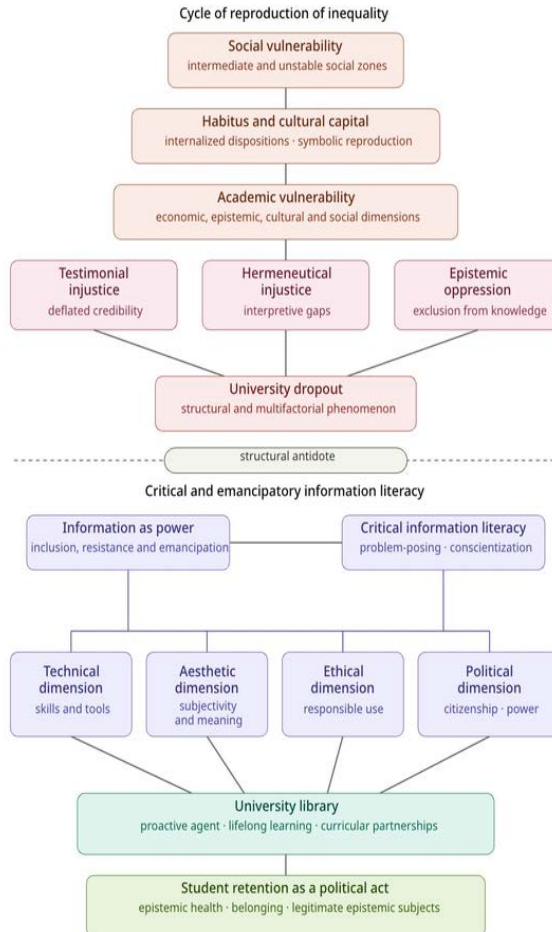


Figure 1. Critical and emancipatory information literacy as an antidote to the cycle of inequality reproduction

Source: Diagram generated with Claude Sonnet 4.6 (Anthropic) on June 07, 2026, from the prompt: "Create a two-movement flowchart representing the cycle of reproduction of inequality in higher education (social vulnerability, habitus and cultural capital, academic vulnerability, epistemic injustice, and university dropout) and the structural antidote through critical and emancipatory information literacy (four dimensions, university library, and student retention as a political act)."

Critical and emancipatory information literacy, given this context, should not be treated as a pedagogical luxury or an accessory service; instead, it must be understood as an indispensable component of any institutional retention policy that genuinely aspires to be structural. It is necessary, therefore, that information literacy be constituted by a multiple nature, grounded in a political praxis that translates into a pedagogy of resistance and critical awareness.

The question that ultimately arises is not whether information literacy can truly serve as an “antidote” to academic vulnerability and dropout. The questions are political: It is necessary to understand whether Brazilian universities are willing to recognize it as a structural component of any serious retention policy; whether university libraries are willing to assume the role of agents of epistemic justice that falls to them; and whether student assistance systems are willing to broaden their conception of vulnerability beyond the socioeconomic register, including the multiple forms of epistemic deprivation that make retention impossible even for students who receive scholarships, housing, and food. As long as these questions remain without effective answers, the expansion of access to higher education will continue to produce, for a significant portion of the population, a truncated inclusion, one in which the entry door exists, but the exit door, with diploma in hand, remains blocked.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS AND REMARKS

Brazilian higher education expanded its doors without transforming its practices. In incorporating, over recent decades, specific policies for the access of students of popular origin who would have had great difficulty reaching the university in previous generations, educational institutions fulfilled a historical function of democratizing access but did not guarantee the epistemic conditions necessary for these students to remain studying. The academic vulnerability that manifests in high dropout rates is not, at its root, a financial problem: it is a problem of accumulated cultural and informational deprivation, in which the university tends to deepen the competence gaps between those who belong to the academic field and those who were merely authorized to enter. Understanding this mechanism is the first step toward confronting it, and this effort at understanding is what this article set out to accomplish.

In the face of these tensions, information literacy, understood in its critical, political, and emancipatory dimension, emerges as a structural “antidote” to student dropout, insofar as it acts precisely on the mechanisms that feed abandonment. It is worth noting, in this regard, that traditional information literacy, when reduced to its instrumental and technicist dimension, is not itself immune to reproducing the very inequities it might otherwise challenge: by presupposing prior socialization into academic information practices, by privileging formal and institutionally sanctioned knowledge, and by detaching competence development from the lived contexts and epistemic trajectories of students, it risks becoming yet another mechanism of exclusion, accessible only to those who already possess the cultural capital the university values. This is precisely why the critical and emancipatory inflection of information literacy

is not optional: it is the condition under which literacy ceases to be reproductive and becomes genuinely transformative. Developing information literacy in more vulnerable students is not merely offering them a complementary service; it means restoring to them the condition of legitimate epistemic subjects that the symbolic violence of the school and the university systematically denies them. The university library, within this framework, is the institutional space best positioned to operationalize this restitution, not because it is the only space capable of developing such literacy, but because it is one of the few that serves all students transversally, regardless of their field, academic year, or socioeconomic condition. To this end, however, it is necessary that librarians and information professionals move beyond passive service models and adopt a proactive stance, integrating lifelong learning into the reception processes from the beginning of academic life and articulating curricular partnerships with faculty.

The expansion of access to higher education in Brazil, expressive in numbers but insufficient in outcomes, continues to produce, for significant portions of the population, a truncated inclusion: one in which the entry door exists, but the exit door, with diploma in hand, remains blocked. Breaking this cycle requires that universities recognize information literacy as a structural component of any serious retention policy; that university libraries and their professionals assume the role of promoting epistemic justice that falls to them; and that student assistance systems broaden their conception of vulnerability beyond the income criterion, including the multiple forms of epistemic deprivation that make retention inviable even for those who receive scholarships, housing, and food.

The epistemic health of students, that is, their capacity to function fully as producers and evaluators of knowledge, is not a pedagogical luxury: it is a condition of university dignity. And dignity is not distributed by decree: it is achieved through praxis, through resistance, and through the conviction that other ways of inhabiting the university are not only necessary but possible. Future studies should empirically examine the relationship between information literacy programmes, epistemic belonging, and student retention among socially vulnerable university populations in Brazil and beyond, testing the theoretical propositions advanced here against concrete educational contexts and diverse institutional realities.

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