Young people from São Paulo and their desire to change (or not) the world: a study on Moral Education

Hanna Cebel Danza[1]
Valéria Amorim Arantes[2]

Resumo: O presente estudo tem como objetivo investigar quais mudanças jovens paulistanos estudantes do Ensino Médio desejam para o mundo, antes e após uma intervenção de Educação Moral. O estudo contou com a participação de 108 jovens em duas fases de pesquisa: uma ao ingressarem no Ensino Médio, previamente a intervenção; e outra no início do terceiro ano no Ensino Médio, após dois anos de intervenção. Para coletarmos os dados, que compõem uma tese de doutoramento, usamos um questionário composto por 23 questões, sendo que para esse estudo foram analisadas apenas as 3 últimas. Tal instrumento foi aplicado em ambas as fases da pesquisa na escola em que os alunos estudam e onde a intervenção foi realizada. Os resultados indicam que a intervenção contribuiu para que os alunos detectassem com mais facilidade problemas encontrados no mundo, elegessem de modo autônomo aqueles problemas que mais lhes incomodam, ampliassem sua percepção sobre modos de atuação para contribuir com as mudanças dos problemas e diminuíssem o sentimento de impotência diante desses temas.
Palavras Chave: educação moral, projetos de vida, moralidade.

Abstract: This study aims at investigating the changes young High School students from São Paulo desire for the world, before and after a Moral Education intervention. The study counted on the participation of 108 students in the study's two phases: one when they first started High School, before the intervention; and another when they started the third year of High School, after two years of intervention. For the purpose of collecting the data a doctoral thesis comprises, we applied a questionnaire consisting of 23 questions, and for this study, only the last three of them were analyzed. Such instrument was applied in both phases of the research conducted at the school those students attend, and where the intervention was performed. The results indicate that the intervention helped students to more easily detect issues found in the world, autonomously elect the issues that bothered them the most, broaden their perception of how to act so as to aid in changing them, and feeling less helpless when facing them.
Keywords: moral education, purpose in life, morality.

INTRODUCTION

The ethical dimension of the human existence seems to rely on the decision of how one wants to live applied to the individual and collective dimensions. Such decision about *how to live* occurs with a game that combines human incompleteness and indeterminacy, and the possibility to reflectively decide on how to deal with that openness (Puig, 1998, p.26). This game brings us close to the concept of "project" defended by Machado (2006), by first resorting to the Complete Work (vols. II and V) by Ortega y Gasset, who state that:

> "...all life, in its root, is project, especially if it galvanizes the full ballistic meaning that resides in the etymology of this word. Our life is something that is launched within the scope of existence, it is a projectile; but, in turn, this projectile is the one that has to choose the

---

[1] Doctoral Candidate at the Graduate Program from Faculdade de Educação da Universidade de São Paulo. Email: hannadanza@usp.br
[2] Faculty Member at Faculdade de Educação da Universidade de São Paulo. Email: varantes@usp.br

target... the most important factor of human condition is to have a life project that inspires and guides all our actions."

According to Machado (2000, 2006), the word, project, comes from the Latin *projectus*. Since our birth, we are launched forward like a jet (*pro jactum*), choosing targets, making paths, and articulating vital trajectories. Our actions always assume a type of preference, represent some type of providence, and an effort to prefigure what is way ahead in the future. In our trajectory, we take into account the limits that guide us within the moral space, the values that constitute the scenario of every project.

For Machado (ibid.), the project gives meaning to people's life by means of four constitutive elements: 1) targets, goals to be met in a scenario of values; 2) future in the sense that there is no project without the prefiguration of an action to be carried out in time; 3) non-determination in the sense of involving risks; 4) the existence of a designer (a person, a team, a social group, or an entire collectivity). By assuming that being alive is to intend to do something, to set out in a permanent search for a goal, the idea of project seems to characterize human life.

Projects, goals, purposes give meaning to the life of people, organize thoughts, feelings and actions, and are related to the system of the values they follow. By assuming the idea that the project can add to comprehending human morality, in the past years we have come close to the concept of purpose (understood as "life project" in Portuguese) that was adopted by the psychologist, William Damon, from Stanford University (US). For Damon, purpose in life is understood as "the stable and generalized intention to reach something meaningful to the self and has consequences on the world that go beyond the self[3]" (Damon, 2009, p.53.)

Accordingly, purposes in life allow subjects to establish trajectories that single out their lives to the extent that they constitute their identities by articulating values, circumstances, and projections. Their centrality in life allows them to exercise their full ability to make decisions and choices that aim at personal accomplishment and satisfaction, and create benefits for the collectivity.

To build a purpose in life requires that the subjects know themselves and the world surrounding them so that they are able to identify needs, issues, and conflicts that are present in the context. At the same time, by analyzing the possibilities they have to act in the reality, they are in condition to establish long-term goals that can make a difference in the world. Purpose in life comes in as a backdrop that guides goals and targets for a more immediate future, which justifies the subjects' actions, concerns, and choices (Damon, 2009). Thus we approached Moral Education, which has as its main goal to help students adopt a way of life that is coherent with that which they desire for themselves and their peers. (Puig & Martín, 2010).

We agree with Martinez (2001), according to whom, to morally educate people is to create conditions for them to be able to appreciate and incorporate moral values, by encouraging that which makes it possible for values, such as solidarity, justice, freedom, honesty, among others, to be guided by the value of dignity, and become a social, economical, cultural, legal and political assurance. This view offers more precise value guides so that we are able to reflect on what a way of life that establishes coherence between what is desirable for oneself and for others would be.

By assuming the intrinsic relationship between school education and moral education, we agree with Moreno et al (1999), when they warn us that there is nothing that justifies orienting education only toward the traditional cognitive knowledge

---

[3] The English word, self, refers to the dimension of one's own self. In this article's context, we chose to keep the original term since the Portuguese language lacks a term that expresses the same meaning.

included in the curriculum, particularly faced with the expressed desire of not keeping human relationships as they are. By agreeing with this view, and assuming that the ability to build one's life requires a type of ability that is not easily acquired with accidental learning or informal education, Martínez and Hoyos (2006) stress the need for establishing moral education as the central axis of the educational task.

By treading this path, this study, which is a doctoral thesis, is about building purposes in the life of students as they go through High School, and how a Moral Education intervention can add to this complex development. Such intervention, which we conducted at a school in the Zona Sul region in the city of São Paulo, counted on a Moral Education program oriented toward building purposes in life that has been developed by means of a class offered weekly as part of the curriculum over the three years of High School. Starting from a constructivist conceptual framework, we developed a program that highlighted the need for students to become involved in the process of getting to know themselves and the world they live in, so that, by developing concepts about these two views, they would be able to come up with a purpose in life that would allow them to attain self-fulfillment and ethical insertion in society.

The thesis of longitudinal nature is still being developed, thus we will present a partial analysis of some of the results obtained after two years of intervention.

By aiming at understanding to what extent young people can become involved with the changes in the world by means of their purposes in life, we present next this study's goals: a) To find out what aspects young people from São Paulo would like to change in the world; b) To investigate how they become involved with those changes, and c) To compare the changes and how they become involved with them before and after a Moral Education intervention is applied.

METHOD

Participants and procedures

108 students from the school where we developed the Moral Education program took part in this study. We counted on 63 female participants and 45 male participants. The age group ranged from 14 to 15 years old in the first phase, and from 16 to 17 years old in the second phase. The participants' socio-economic profile[4] is middle class[5], and many of them belong to families that have recently risen socially, which allowed them to attend this school that, despite being located in the outskirts of a large urban center, is a private school.

We applied the questionnaire produced and validated by Damon (2009) as data collection instrument. We limited this study to the last three questions on this instrument, and we present them next:

1. What would you like to be different in the world? Why? How do you feel about that?
2. Do you do anything to make this change become a reality? If yes, what is it? If not, why not?
3. And do you intend to do something about that in the future? Explain.

---

[4] The socio-economic profile was established based on the information collected by applying online an instrument that was prepared based on the socio-economic questionnaire from Exame Nacional para Certificação de Competências de Jovens e Adultos (ENCCEJA) 2013 from Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira (INEP) and Brazilian Youth Questionnaire (KOLLER, DELL'AGLIO, 2011).

[5] Secretaria de Assuntos Estratégicos (SAE) defines the Brazilian middle class as the group comprised by families with average income between R$ 300 and R$ 1K. Today, this universe represents 54% of the country's population.

The instrument was applied[6] in two phases, where the first phase was applied in the beginning of the first year of High School and the second phase was applied in the beginning of the third year of High School during class hours, always at the school those students attended. This procedure allowed us to investigate the student's opinions before and after the intervention, so as to check how it added to the participants' moral education.

Qualitative data analysis

By taking into account the research's qualitative nature as well as the instrument we used, we opted for an analysis procedure that consisted of sorting the data collected into categories that emerged from the answers given, in order to not include them in predetermined categories. Furthermore, we highlight that, since the participants could mention more than one category in each question, the numeric data does not correspond to the number of participants but to the number of mentions made in each content.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

We present next (Table 1) the results obtained with the first question that was asked in the first phase of the research, when the students started their first year of High School, and had yet to start attending Moral Education classes.

Table 1. Changes young people desired in Phase 1

CHANGES·YOUNG·PEOPLE·DESIRE – ·PHASE·1	
CHANGES	**NUMBER·OF·MENTIONS**
Violence	38
Attitudes·(fights,·malice,· mistreatment,·greed,·hypocrisy	25
Wars	13
Politics/Corruption	12
Environmental·protection	11
Social·inequality	11
Lack·of·respect	10
Prejudice	5
I·do·not·know	5
Diseases	4
Illiteracy	4
Nothing	3
Access·to·education	2
Human·relations	1
Beauty·standards	1
Gender·inequality	1
Unhappiness	1
Bullying	1

In this phase, we verified that the change they desired the most concerns violence, which was mentioned 38 times. The following example illustrates this type of answer:

> "That there wasn't so much violence, because this is something that shouldn't exist. I feel bad for seeing innocent people dying because of people that don't care about that innocence" (15 years old, female).

---

[6] The ethical procedures and the participants' anonymity were preserved according to the norms established by Resolution 196/96 from Conselho Nacional de Saúde for conducting surveys with human beings, and according to the determinations of the Estatuto da Criança e do Adolescente.

Several attitudes that were seen as negative, such as fights, malice, mistreatment, greed, and hypocrisy, were mentioned next. For analysis purpose, we chose to place them in a category called "Attitudes." Let's see an example:

> "I'd like people to be less greedy, that they stopped wanting it all even if that hurts other people" (15 years old, male).

Wars and politics/corruption are mentioned in third and fourth place, respectively. We chose to group the answers about politics and corruption together, since all those who mentioned corruption did so referring to political issues. Two typical answers within this category are found below for illustrative purpose:

> "I believe that the world would be better if wars didn't exist, no fighting for power and lands." (14 years old, male).

> "I wanted to change politics in our country, that it would be done by honest and not corrupted people. I get outraged when I see a politician stealing from the population!" (15 years old, female).
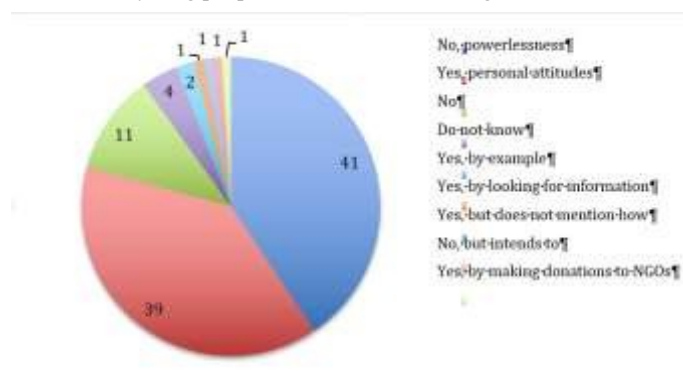
Although the students listed several pertinent aspects that they would like to change, such data could point to incipient autonomous reflections about issues faced in the world, and the students' speech was probably affected by the impact caused by the disclosure of violent events, wars, and political issues by the media.

On this table, we highlighted the two categories named "I do not know" and "Nothing." On the first one, the students answered that they do not know what aspects they would like to be different in the world, while in the second one, they said that there is nothing they would like to be different. Both categories showed a weakened perception of the issues the world faces that need to change.

Other aspects, such as environmental protection, social inequality, lack of respect, prejudice, diseases, and illiteracy were also mentioned by several participants. The other elements that are present on the table were mentioned only once.

Still on this phase, when asked whether they were doing anything to make the desired changes a reality, most of the participants (41 mentions) answered that they were not, and attributed that to the age group's characteristic helplessness, or to the fact that they are not able to make changes of this magnitude on their own, as we can see on Chart 1.

Chart 1. Current actions young people take to make the changes mentioned in Phase 1 a reality.

Next, we present an example that characterizes this category:

> "No, because I can' think of something a 15-year-old girl could do to change the conflicts that emerged a long time ago." (15 years old, female).
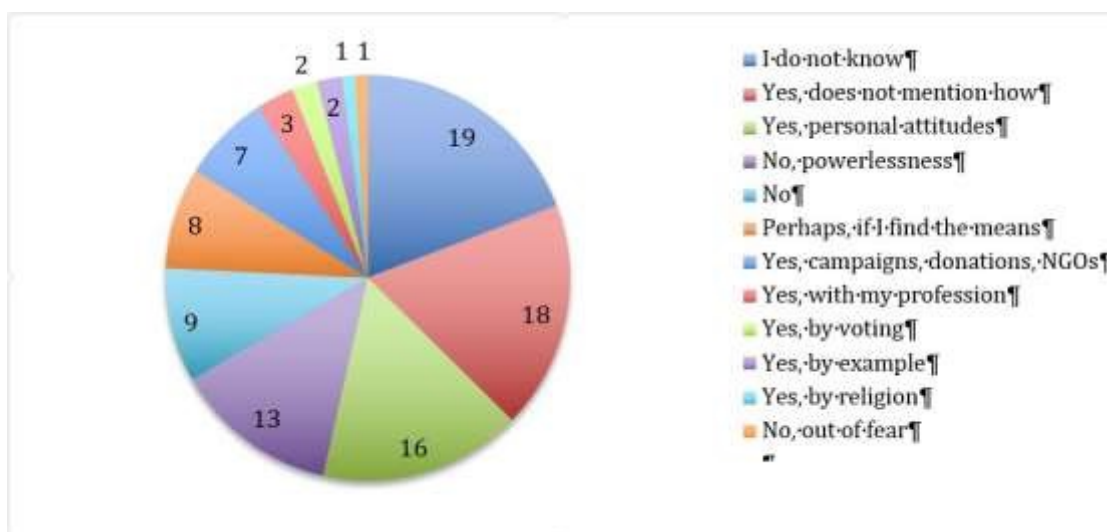
Next, we had a large number of participants that answered that they accomplish the changes with their personal attitudes. In this large group we found those students who believe that their contribution is to not act in the way they see as being wrong, such as disrespect, "malice", greed and arrogance. It is important to point out that this category of action is not linked exclusively to those who wanted that the changes were related to people's attitudes, meaning that there are those who mentioned that the change they wanted is the absence of wars, and as action they answered; "I don't take part or support wars." Here is an example:

> "I have never been violent, I always try to be nice with people, and help them in whatever they need." (14 years old, male).

There was also a large number of participants who answered that they do not do anything to make this change a reality, in the same way that there were students that answered that they do not know whether they add anything or not. The other categories were poorly represented in the sample, thus indicating that most participants either do nothing toward making the changes they want to see in the world a reality, or do something privately and individually, and, often, there is no relation at all between these attitudes and the issues identified.

In line with the absence of more assertive actions toward making the changes a fact, when questioned whether they intended to do something about that in the future, most of the students (19 mentions, where, in this case the number of mentions corresponded to the number of students) answered "I do not know", as it is possible to observe on Chart 2.

Chart 2. Actions of young people to make the changes mentioned in Phase 1 a reality in the future.

Second, we have a category of participants stating that they wish to do something in the future, but they do not mention how; third we have the category of participants who mention that they wish to help change by means of individual

attitudes and within the private sphere; and next, we have those who intend to do nothing since they feel powerless, a result of a feeling of not-belonging to a group, when they mention that "one cannot change the world alone", or of hopelessness in relation to the paths society is taking. Next we present some examples of these categories:

> "We certainly always have to help make the world a better place" (15 years old, male).

> "To continue to respect people around me" (14 years old, female).

> "Honestly, I don't, because I think that it wouldn't depend on me alone" (15 years old, female).

There were also those who intend to do nothing in relation to the problems the world faces (9 mentions corresponding to 9 participants), and those who state that they may do something should they find ways to make that feasible.

Those participants, who wish to do something in the future either mentioned participation in campaigns, donations, and NGOs (7 mentions), or the wish to contribute to the changes with the professional careers they will have in the future (3 mentions). The other categories had no representativeness of significance in the study.

> "I intend to make donations to NGOs that care for needy children and people who need help" (15 years old, male).

> "I'll be a lawyer, and I intend to help reduce criminality in the country" (15 years old, female).

By analyzing the data from the research's second phase that was conducted after two years of Moral Education intervention, the students showed a richer and more complex perspective of the changes they would like to occur in the world. As we can see on Table 2, the aspect they mentioned the most referred to individual attitudes within the private scope, such as fights, malice, mistreatment, greed, and hypocrisy. Ranking second and third, we have social inequality and prejudice, respectively, followed by intolerance and violence.

CHANGES-YOUNG-PEOPLE-DESIRE--PHASE-2	
CHANGES	NUMBER-OF-MENTIONS
Attitudes (fights, malice, mistreatment, greed, hypocrisy)	38
Social inequality	21
Prejudice	21
Intolerance	14
Violence	10
Wars	6
Illiteracy	6
Lack of respect	6
Indifference	6
Gender inequality	5
Politics/Corruption	5
Animal mistreatment	4
Human relations	2
Access to education	2
Unhappiness	2
Irresponsible upbringing	1
Media manipulation	1
Drugs	1
Public health	1
Environmental protection	1
Diseases	1

Next, we present some examples of these categories:

> "There are bad people who do bad things. They are obsessed with money, they see only their benefit, and still pretend that they want to help others, to do good" (17 years old, male).
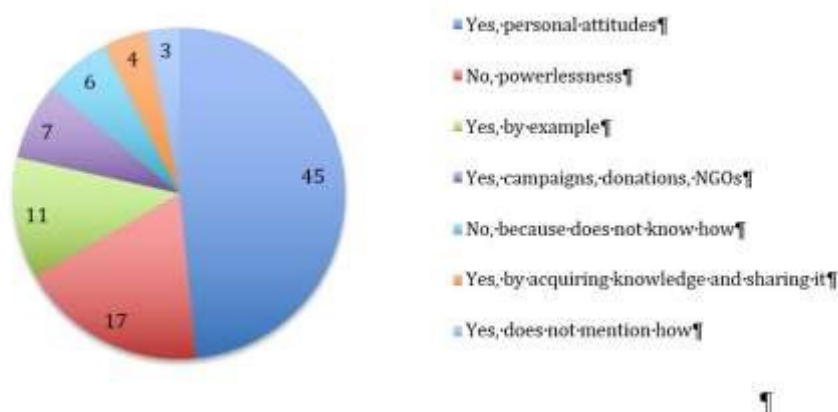
> "I'd like to change social inequality that involves racism, and that we can see in many places. I'd like everyone to have the same opportunities." (17 years old, male).

> "Intolerance and disrespect, because they are the basis to coexist well. Why can't people tolerate the differences?" (16 years old, female).

Overall, there was an increased number of issues the participants mentioned, along with the absence of answers like "Nothing" or "I do not know", which were found in the research's first phase.

Concerning what they do to make those changes a reality, we had in the second phase a large increase in mentions in the category, "Personal attitudes", and a decrease in number of mentions from those who do nothing because they feel powerless, although this category still shows large representativeness, as it is possible to see on Chart 3.

Chart 3. Actions of young people in the present to make the changes mentioned in Phase 2 a reality.

Concerning this, it is important to take into account that these participants, who in this phase of the research were between 16 and 17 years old, do not seem to glimpse many action alternatives, understanding that, for the time being, the best they can do is found at individual and private level, or that there is still nothing they can do as a result of the limitations to this age group's way of life. Concerning their actions to help make the desired changes in the present, the vast majority (45 mentions) state that they act by personal attitudes. Such attitudes are always related with the changes they would like to see in the world. Thus, for instance, when they mention individualism, they reveal that they are are constantly attentive to the collectivity, by performing solidary acts and taking into account others in their decisions.

> "Yes, I don't behave or act in a racist manner. I have always been polite to everyone who is different from me, without singling out any race. Furthermore, I support the struggle of those people, and always rush to

32

the defense of someone I notice is suffering prejudice" (16 years old, female).

"There's nothing I can do to solve an issue such as this one" (17 years old, male).

With 11 mentions, we have those who believe that they are helping change things by serving as example to other people surrounding them.
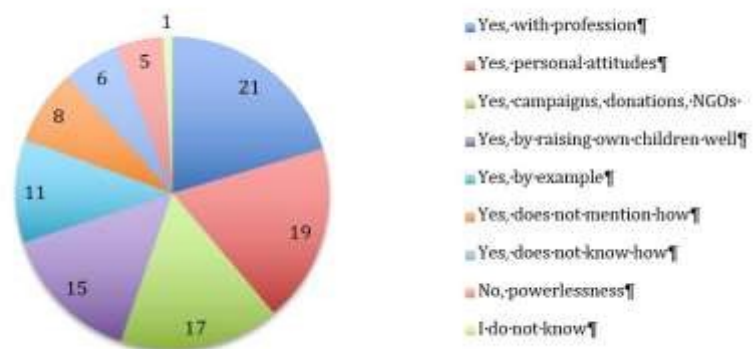
"I always try to give the example by not letting anyone disrespect me and not disrespecting others. I feel I can inspire other people with my actions" (17 years old, male).

There were also those who stated that they help by participating in campaigns, donations or NGOs, those who do not help because they do not know how, those who believe that their contribution is to acquire knowledge about the issues and share it, and those who say they contribute but do not give any information about how they do so.

Thus, what we can notice is that, after the intervention, the students detected more easily the issues found in the world and the changes they would like to occur as a result of those issues, by presenting a richer repertoire of situations that bothers and outrages them.

In the second phase, when asked about their intentions about helping with the changes they desire in the future, most of them revealed their wish to become involved in these changes somehow, as we can see on Chart 4.

Chart 4. Actions of young people in the present to make the changes mentioned in Phase 2 a reality.

The most mentioned category was helping with their professional performance. This was the case of students who seem to have chosen a professional career as a response to something that bothers or outrages them. When it comes to that, we cannot fail to point out that the intervention led to the possibility of contributing socially with their professional performance. We present some examples below:

"Certainly following the political career, which is one of my biggest if not my biggest goal. And thus promote these changes" (17 years old, female).

33

> "Yes, I intend to go to Environmental Engineering College so that I'm able to make those changes everyday in my career" (17 years old, female).

> "Yes, one of my biggest dreams is to get involved in some social entrepreneurship project in the education area, which I'm very interested in. I want to be able to always do more, to no longer be just one more person in the world, and be able to change something, whatever it is, for someone" (17 years old).

Those who wish to help with their personal attitudes belong to the second most mentioned category, followed by those who showed interest in participating in campaigns, making donations and projects for NGOs. Again, this theme was present in our intervention, and the students conducted a research work about the performance of NGOs and social entrepreneurship. Here are some examples:

> "I intend to continue to think before I act, so that I won't adversely affect anyone with my behavior. And always respecting everyone's way of being" (16 years old, male).

> "I intend to take part in NGOs that shelter gay teens who are kicked out of their homes because of bigotry and intolerance on their family's part" (17 years old, male).

An interesting data is that, in this phase, many of them mentioned that they intend to add to changing the world by the way they raise their kids. These participants believe that, by raising their kids in a moral and conscious way, they will help the next generations cause less troubles in the world. It is possible that this category in the second phase emerged resulting from the fact that, in the second year of intervention, the Moral Education classes included the issue of having interest in raising a family in the future, what would their role be, what would their meaning for today's society be, and how it could benefit the collectivity in the future. An example that illustrates this category well is shown below:

> "I'm going to teach my kids, my grandkids, and great-grandkids. I'll go as far as I can to teach respect, tolerance, so that they're able to make a better world" (17 years old, female).

Once again there were participants who bet that their contribution in the future is to offer examples of conduct to other people. However, this time, the example was not restricted to the private sphere, and some of them mentioned that they wish to use their social recognition or prestige to inspire others:

> "Since I wish to become a renowned writer, I believe that I'll be able to inspire people because of my recognition to fight against inequality in this country" (17 years old, male).

We also identified that they state that they wish to help change the future without mentioning how they intend to accomplish this task, and those who wish to do so but do not know how.

Finally, we have the category of those who have no intention to help because of their feeling of powerlessness before the complexity of the issues found in the world. However, what is interesting is to notice how this category started to count on lower numbers of mentions among all the other categories. Thus, when compared with the data collected in Phase 1, we can infer that the students started to glimpse at more possibilities to act aiming at changing things, and acknowledging their ability to promote changes in the society. Thus, although to state or isolate the other external influences is not possible, we emphasize the role the intervention may have played in building how these young people represent themselves in order to be perceived as citizens who are able to intervene and change the world.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Based on the results presented and discussed, after two years of intervention within the moral education scope, we understood that the students:

a) broadened how they perceive the issues in the world;

b) reduced their perception of powerlessness toward these issues;

c) expanded the repertoire of actions they can take aimed at changing those issues;

d) integrated the desire to change their purpose in life, either expressing the desire to change the world with the professional career they choose or expressing the desire of, by having a family, raising their kids to make a better world.

The fact that many students resort to personal attitudes as a way to help change the problems detected reveals a low perception of the social structures that create the issues they would like to face. Thus, we came to the conclusion that this topic should be addressed at schools, whether by Moral Education programs, or interdisciplinarily, by projects, so that every student is able to analyze the social reality they are inserted in, and incorporate it in their ideals in life, assertive types of action aimed at changing it.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

DAMON, W. **O que o jovem quer da vida?** Como pais e professores podem orientar e motivar os adolescentes. São Paulo: Summus, 2009.

KOLLER, S.; DELL'AGLIO, D. **Adolescência e juventude** – vulnerabilidade e contextos de proteção. São Paulo: Casa do Psicólogo, 2011.

MACHADO, N. J. **Educação:** projetos e valores. São Paulo: Escrituras, 2000.

_____. A vida, o jogo, o projeto. In: ARANTES, V. A. (Org.) **Jogo e projeto:** pontos e contrapontos. São Paulo: Summus, 2006.

MARTÍNEZ, M. Escuela y construcción de valores. In: MARTÍNEZ, M.; BUJONS, C. (Orgs.) **Un lugar llamado escuela:** en la sociedad de la información y de la diversidad. Barcelona: Ariel, 2001.

_____.; HOYOS, G. Educación para la ciudadanía en tiempos de globalización. In: MARTÍNEZ, M.; HOYOS, G. (Coords.) **La formación en valores en sociedades democráticas.** Barcelona: Octaedro, 2006.

MORENO, M; SASTRE, G.; BOVET, M.; LEAL, A. **Conhecimento e mudança:** os modelos organizadores na construção do conhecimento. São Paulo: Moderna, 1999.

PUIG, J. M. **A construção da personalidade moral.** São Paulo: Ática, 1998.

_____.; MARTÍN, X. **As sete competencias básicas para educar em valores.** São Paulo: Summus, 2010.