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« Competing for public schools in Rio de Janeiro – reflexions on a hidden quasi-market »

The present article will account for a phenomenon not yet widely studied in the Brazilian context: competition for registration in public schools that cannot be classified among the so-called "elite schools" or "schools of excellence". On the contrary, they are schools not to be included among those allowing the use of such qualifiers. In spite of little attention in the specialized literature, the phenomenon is expressed by means of some competition resources used by the student's family in search of better educational opportunities, as well as by educational bureaucracy, this latter with an active role in this process. The phenomenon under analysis is articulated with the intricate network of social hierarchies and can be associated with unequal opportunities characterizing Brazilian society. Social relations patrimony available for the actors of such process is strongly mobilized in cases where, in face of insufficient school supply, the struggle for better opportunities is taken as an important aspect for many individuals and their families.

From this perspective, it is possible to say that there is a strong educational quasi-market in Brazil, as seen in the discussion starting from the economic thought and educational reform policies initiated in the last decades of the 20th century. Such quasi-market, however, shows some particularities, once its mechanisms are not clearly visible and sometimes are even deliberately hidden.

In order to approach the subject, we will start with an indication of the present relevance of the theme, considering recent educational policies sustained by the Federal Government as well as the reactions they evoke. We will then try to delimit the use of the concept of quasi-market¹ so as to allow the understanding of a highly unfair aspect of Brazilian public education systems. Following this, we shall start the discussion based on the terms proposed by recent educational research works. A next step will be the presentation of the findings in a case study carried out in Rio de Janeiro, which allowed the observation of this phenomenon through its conclusions on social selectivity issues. As to our final considerations, we will discuss the consequences of a refusal to recognize the operation of the above cited quasi-market in the Brazilian public school systems.

¹ This doesn't imply adherence to some propositions of school system's organization based on competition mechanisms.

Educational Accountability and Assessment in Brazil – timidity and reactions

In the end of 2007, the Brazilian Government announced the Education Development Plan – PDE, in Brazilian Portuguese initials. Among a number of resolutions, there is one, somewhat timid, which could be referred to as accountability. The Index of Basic Education Development – IDEB in Brazilian Portuguese initials – was created as a measure consisting of proficiency indicators in tests with Portuguese and Mathematics contents (Prova Brasil) and of an indicator of promotion rates among students of the basic segment². This measure can be aggregated at both school and school system levels.

The IDEB aims to guide educational policy interventions, as it allows a comparison between different schools and/or school systems, indicating those in need of extra help or corrective measures. In a first instance, the Brazilian Ministry of Education listed nearly one thousand municipalities with a low IDEB, aiming to implement specific policies for improving school performance and flux indicators. In this way, the IDEB calls the attention to more problematic situations by means of performance measurements in public school networks, allowing the establishment of goals for the system as a whole. In this case, it should not be considered as an indicator for the implementation of policies for higher quality or better educational coverage by means of competitive mechanisms.

The IDEB can be seen as the consequence of a number of central assessment initiatives implemented as of the years 1990's. Such initiatives have been deeply criticized, even though oppositions have now been reduced or turned to a new focus. In general terms, arguments contrary to central assessment hope to make their alleged liberal inspiration more explicit. An assessment of this kind is seen as an instrument for school hierarchization, solidification of school advantages and disadvantages, privatization of public schools and as a disguise to the socially unfair aspect of educational opportunities³. In general terms, central assessment is seen as a way to stimulate the creation of a market, or better, to follow the terminology adopted in the English case, a quasi-market.

Learning assessments in a broader scale prosper along with initiatives for the solution of chronic problems in educational systems, by stimulating competition and relying on the

² Brazilian fundamental education is usually divided in two segments respectively consisting of five and four school years.

³ A recent image of such arguments can be found in SOUZA and OLIVEIRA (2003). Also, there are arguments contrary to external assessments in a specific pedagogical field, but these essentially stem from poor information on this kind of resource.

emission of the signals produced by the assessments as an incentive to this competitive condition between different educational units as well as between “consumers”. Nonetheless, major educational assessment systems are not exclusively used in this way.

The repercussion as to the IDEB in public opinion and academic environment has fallen under expectations. Reactions observed in the latter were, as usual, negative. Allegations that the IDEB was a strategy for the production of school rankings soon arouse. It would favor the establishment of a competitive dynamics typically found in markets (Leher, 2007; CNTE, 2007). The phenomenon presumed in this paper can also be observed as to the Secondary School National Exam – ENEM⁴, in Brazilian Portuguese initials – whose results, as a rule, come out in written press as a ranking of the best and worst educational institutions, and sometimes as a comparison between private and public schools. Among other competitive resources, private schools make use of their rank positions to obtain better market results. Likewise, a small number of public schools develop self-strengthening strategies making use of their positions. The existence of a widely competitive school market is then evident for a few segments of the population willing to make investments, financial or other, in the education of their children.

The quasi-market as an analytical resource

It is not difficult to notice an intense dispute for registration in some public schools which clearly stand out for their reputation as high quality educational institutions. They are not many and generally fall under federal administration, being sometimes affiliated to public universities also at federal level. These schools enjoy exceptional conditions when compared to other institutions in the public educational system.

When we consider these schools as well as those in the private system it is easy to observe aspects of the school market or school-choice. Our focus, however, lies on a less visible phenomenon: competition for schools not included among top-rank institutions, not figuring in newspaper articles, nor visible outside the public they serve. Despite being less visible, it is possible to recognize a tough competition, among students, for these schools and, in a lower scale, competition for students among them.

Not long ago, after the implementation of *Prova Brasil*, the Brazilian Ministry of Education encouraged a survey on “efficient schools”⁵, so as to find out the “secrets” of some public

⁴ A national exam, not mandatory, for graduates from the secondary school system.

⁵ See MEC, *Aprova Brasil - o Direito de Aprender: boas práticas em escolas públicas avaliadas pela Prova Brasil* (date unknown).

institutions, both at municipal and state spheres, where students’ performance was above the national average, considering the 4th and the 8th years of fundamental education⁶. In order to identify factors associated with better performances in *Prova Brasil 2005*, schools from different parts of the country were submitted to a research technique known as rapid assessment. Results have proven to be of great interest for the study of what we call “school effect”, considering contrasts observed between educational institutions.

We were surprised by the fact that not even a single word was said about the occurrence of effects not produced by a virtuous school dynamics, but observed due to the composition of the students’ socioeconomic background and to a social selection operated within the institutions themselves. Selection, as noticed in previous studies, takes place at two complementary levels: admittance and permanence at school.

The present article is the result of a research project whose purpose was to recognize, in an explanatory way, characteristics of ordinary municipal schools in Rio de Janeiro, considered to be very good by both the educational bureaucracy and the population in general. It started as a somewhat modest research project carried out in six municipal schools arranged in pairs in three different parts of the city. The pairs were formed by a school considered good and another with the opposite image. During field research, the subject concerning school selectivity stood out and we decided to pay more attention to what we called a hidden quasi-market.

Even before field research started, in the end of 2005, something called our attention. Intermediate organs in the Municipal Education Secretariat constantly denied access to one piece of information: the family’s demand for schools in the transition from the 4th to 5th grades of fundamental school⁷. In the beginning, we could not understand why there should be so much resistance to something that seemed simple: our access to the lists of school preferences in which parents ranked institutions of their choice for the next segment of fundamental education. After a few months, we gave it up and started to work on information unofficially obtained from members of pedagogical teams as to school preferences in a given jurisdiction.

⁶ A recent rearrangement in fundamental school changed these into 5th and 9th grades of fundamental education.

⁷ This nomenclature was changed in 2008, to 5th and 6th years, respectively. We’re talking about what can be compared to the transition between elementary school and the following segment of basic education, with a broader curriculum and more specialized faculty. In Brasil, we often observe school transfer at this stage.

A little apprehensive in the beginning, we finally decided to use information obtained in this way for the selection of schools to be included in the case study. Previously observed, differences between public schools were taken for granted, as we have long abandoned the simple dichotomies (public-private; lay-religious etc.) that historically marked Brazilian educational thought as the only method of classification. In spite of that, selective differentiation between schools soon stood out as a recurrent theme. Moreover, it became evident that hidden processes might be going on and that denial actually revealed to us important mechanisms of social selection.

Since the middle 20th century, public education in Brazil has been inspired on universalist principles found in the Pioneers Manifest of 1932⁸. For that matter, unofficial selective processes based on clear meritocratic mechanisms tend to remain unrecognized or even hidden. More recently, it became possible to think that an official denial of a meritocratic selection starts from the recognition that such procedure leads to a social-oriented selection. A dilemma is then created. In face of a limited supply of something for which a tough dispute is observed, a refusal of universalist assessments which may disguise social selectivity may give way to even more unequal selection forms, based on the candidate's patrimony of social relations.

Seemingly, this is what could be observed in the studied case.

When looking for conceptual elements to help us understand our object of analysis, we came across a number of works on what we call an educational quasi-market. Polemics started with the emblematic Educational Reform Act of 1988, in England. Since then, the development of several educational policies has been based on the premise that competition between existing agents in the field of education may represent a solution for the inefficacy of public school systems. It is not our intention to take up again the discussion on this conception arising from a current of liberalism that supports competition as the motor of progress. It is nevertheless impossible not to mention it, once the very notion of quasi-market, including a prescriptive character, can not be dissociated from the background of values from which it arises.

We understand that the central issue of the educational quasi-market is the concept of school choice. The quasi-market starts to operate when educational opportunities are

⁸ Document signed by Brazilian intellectuals, a landmark in the fight for a lay public education as a universal right.

offered in a menu of choices. With the creation of a demand (students/clients), a reaction could be observed as to the supply. Having lost some of the typical protections of the welfare state, the school market would have to adjust itself to attract students for its quality, based on the kind of educational product schools had to offer. Signals from central educational assessment systems should force school supply to improve its quality in face of the aggregated effect of competition for clients⁹. In this way, clear notion of a self-organizing quasi-market, despite some important differences observed in relation to typical markets.

Le Grand (1991) synthesizes the reasons for the addition of the element “quasi” to the classic concept of market.

“They are 'markets' because they replace monopolistic state providers with competitive independent ones. They are 'quasi' because they differ from conventional markets in a number of key ways... On the supply side, as with conventional markets, there is competition between productive enterprises or service suppliers.... However, in contrast to conventional markets, these organizations are not necessarily out to maximize their profits; nor are they necessarily privately owned. ... On the demand side, consumer purchasing power is not expressed in money terms. Instead it takes the form of an earmarked budget or 'voucher' confined to the purchase of a specific service.” (Le Grand, p. 1259)

Our point here is neither to defend nor to attack the implementation of educational quasi-market policies and we are not going to discuss their advantages and disadvantages. As a matter of fact, even defenders of such policies seem to be aware of its weaknesses and imperfections, as well as of the negative effects they tend to produce.

Negative reviews of such policies normally refer to mechanisms in the supply side of the educational quasi-market. As far as the English Educational Reform is concerned, an increased demand for schools with better performances, the institutions' stronger control over admittance methods and local educational authorities (LEA) loss of control over those, have encouraged the adoption of procedures to allow a favorable influx, avoiding “difficult-to-teach” students (West 2006 & West & Pannell, 2002). In the same direction,

⁹ In the English educational quasi-market, for instance, publications such as the “School Performance Tables” inform school performance in standardized tests. These would be clear signals for an assessment of the quality of schools (Bradley, Crouchley & Millington, 2000).

Glennerster (1991) highlights a strong tendency to selection, what contradicts the concepts of the quasi-market as a panacea to the weaknesses of public school systems, in face of a predictable increase of inequalities. Similar reviews were posted to the effects of selection mechanisms introduced by the educational reform in the United States (Astin, 1992).

In the North American context, negative reviews were also posted as to the mechanisms of school choice on the demand side. In her study, Bell (2005, 2006) notices that in spite of the similar methods of schools choice being used by parents from different social origins, the schools they take in consideration and their probability of choosing a high performance school are not the same. This can be partly explained by the fact that social networks have proven to be of great influence in parental choice. Nevertheless, social networks formed by parents from different social groups have put them in contact with different sets of schools. Van Zanten (2005) summarizes a diversity of circumstances in which quasi-market situations develop in European contexts. The author emphasizes the supply-side, pointing out the aspects of the competition for students practiced by the bureaucracies of the school establishments, according to artifices she describes. Agnes Van Zanten stresses the competition between schools for students. In the Brazilian context, we can suppose that in the ordinary public schools, it seems that there is mainly a competition among students for schools, in face of a very limited supply of schools with outstanding reputation. The active role of the schools in the selection process should not be made difficult by the competition with other schools of good standards, given their scarcity. Furthermore, in Brazil, the lack of autonomy and clear accountability standards limit the competition among schools.

In the cases studied in Europe, as in Brazil, it seems that the reputation is the attractive differential of a school. This reputation is fundamentally built by the profile of the students attended. There, as well as here, the procedures and the formally not foreseen, irregular or even illegal mechanisms are reported, going against, by the dynamism of the competition, the principles of equality of opportunity so dear to liberal thought. Hence, there are hidden devices, an expression also used by the author.

The competition for public schools must be contextualized, as it reaches distinctive levels. According to the author, in countries where freedom of choice prevails as a value (eg. in Belgium), less constrained by the value of equality, the quasi-market is openly practiced. Yet, in countries as France, it assumes more hidden features. This also means that the

quasi-market is displaced inside the schools, to the classroom organization. On the other hand, it must be taken into consideration the fact that, differing from the general European context, in Brazil, it seems there isn't a consistent demand or effective pressure of statistically relevant sectors of the middle classes within the public schools quasi-market. Although a more profound investigation is necessary, it seems that these sectors almost completely stepped aside the big public networks of basic education, at least in Rio de Janeiro and in the larger urban centers.

In Brazil, where the deterioration of the public school networks reached high levels, we suppose that a lower variability in socioeconomic terms of the attended public should not correspond to an equivalent lower variability of the quality and market position of the schools. It seems that our frame is one of greater inequality, given the scarcity of good supply recognized.

In Van Zanten's study of five countries, there are important perceptions useful to think the Brazilian case. However, in Brazil, where the public schools dispose of very little differential resources in their strategies to attract students, the most relevant element is the consolidated reputation of the schools. Still, there is a phenomenon of internal differentiation by school period, something typical of Latin America. In our research, as well as in Van Zanten's one, we can often find two schools in one. The "worst" students are allocated to the afternoon period and, in turn, less attention and resources of all kinds are also designated to this school period. In this instance, we can also observe a dispute for positions.

In spite of some controversies, our interest in the concept of quasi-market is maintained, as it can be used for its analytical possibilities. Indeed, even in face of a lack of official policies to stimulate school choice, or in the absence of a system of consequences (rewards, interventions, control systems) for the institutions associated with such choices, and considering the increasing accountability of local management, it is possible to think in the occurrence of educational quasi-markets. Until very recently, in Brazil, important initiatives as to accountability or school-choice policies were absent. People, however, have their own mechanisms of hierarchical classification of schools – both at public and private spheres – and use these signals in the search of a school for their children. Nevertheless, signals allowing school hierarchization are not so clear as those observed in regulated quasi-markets. In the Brazilian case, the agents of the dispute may have unequal access to the signals that allow such hierarchization and this can be related to the

social capital they own. Considering that Bell (2005, 2006) identified unequal results generated by the choices of parents from different backgrounds and social networks, even in the presence of clear signals, we may expect that, in the absence of them, as in the Brazilian case, a differentiation of choice opportunities is even more noticeable.

This classification produces diverse effects, both at intraschool and extraschool spheres, and both in the organized quasi-market and in schools’ internal processes. These effects can be identified as a dispute for positions in the market, as Max Weber delineated (1992). They mobilize strong hierarchical notions, even in low prestige segments, characterized by little power and low income, as described by Elias and Scotson (2000).

On the other hand, schools – or better, the school bureaucracy at an intermediate level of educational management – are not, in spite of what is preconized in the most orthodox descriptions of the educational quasi-market – mere reagents of this demand. They have an active part in this process, modeling the supply and limiting choice possibilities. And, in the case of the hidden quasi-market, it is also possible to observe selection mechanisms not so clear when compared to those in official quasi-markets.

Why use the concept of “hidden quasi-market”? We say it is hidden considering the lack of formal and explicit mechanisms for student selection. These undisclosed procedures allow some schools to actively operate in a market which, from an official point of view, should not and might not be closed. There are vacancies for all – at least in the studied segment. The studied school network, as well as other public education systems in Brazil, does not have devices to act as clear student “filters” (admission exams or other legal mechanisms of selection or exclusion). In spite of that, strong selectivity in high-prestige schools can be observed, even when this process is concealed. Little independence in school management – even if not deliberately stimulated – allowed the creation of ways to “conceal vacancies” or to reject students¹⁰. School migration – usually taken as drop-out by official statistics – is carefully operated by frequently advising parents about a more suitable school alternative for their children.

In the case of Brazilian education, which we intend to consider with our modest case study, the result is a highly hierarchical system, oriented by somewhat fluid criteria, clearly associated with mechanisms of selection based on social backgrounds and contact networks.

¹⁰ Qualitative research collected evidences of some schools refusing to admit students from certain institutions, or offering fewer vacancies than we would expect in regular processes of inter-school transit.

Yair (1996) also recognizes and intelligently analyzes similar mechanisms in an Israeli town, where school-choice policies are absent. The researcher gives an important contribution to our discussion when he proposes the need to create a “market ecology” as a premise on which we can start to understand the transit of students between schools. In his opinion, when considering a registration system with “closed positions”, or a registration market, it is not possible to carry out any analysis following a model of isolated individuals trying to reach positions according to their personal characteristics and dispositions. His point is: to go beyond the individualist model, it is necessary to think about aggregated results of the choices as constraints of possible choices (structural element). He mentions an integrated system in which one kind of school allows the existence of the other. For example, high-selective schools depend on the others that will take students they could not admit.

In other words, Yair thesis is based on a premise of sociological realism¹¹, and tries to make considerations at an individual level, combined at a structural level, according to a model of analytical dualism. Students compete for schools, whereas school not only compete for students but also participate in students’ allocation processes. In the end, a school market ecology may prevent, or at least severely limit, the practice of free choice or the existence of a free school market. Competition or collaboration among schools would be directed by high-prestige schools, which limit choices in other schools and leave them with dependent choices.

In Toronto, Canada, Davies and Quirke (2007) also found hints of a quasi-market not signaled by a culture of standardized tests, not induced by a strong official policy, but produced by the niche segmentation of school demand and supply. This can be seen as an equivalent of our public school quasi-market.

As we have already mentioned, almost all author that focus quasi-markets and school choice from an analytical point of view bring severe considerations about the negative effects of school choice. In extreme cases they even indicate disruptive movements of the national sociability as, in some circumstances, – it seems to be the case of post socialist Eastern Europe – the combination of school choice with wide school autonomy has lead to

¹¹ Even though beyond our goals, we’d like to comment that Yair sociological realism sometimes seems to be close to a functional-structuralist approach, provided that schools seem to gain an intentionality that can not be reduced to the rationale of its internal agents, qualified for decision taking. This does not make the present work less pertinent for the achievement of our goals.

a huge diversity in terms of curriculum and to the channeling of public resources to communal, sub-national, ethnic and religious initiatives (Heyneman, 1997).

We do not adopt, a priori, a position against policies that, in some degree, stimulate the freedom of school choice and the controlled diversification of supply by the schools. However, our preliminary contact with the literature and, above all, the research already conducted suggest that a hidden quasi-market, which we assert it exists in our context, combined with the recognized precarious situation of public school supply, produces effects that propel inequalities of opportunities.

Results of a small survey

Data presented in this section were obtained in a survey carried out in the second semester of 2006 with students from six different municipal schools in Rio de Janeiro. Students in the 5th and 8th grades of fundamental school were given a questionnaire with 55 questions¹² whose contents included topics on their school life, family compositions, general demographic characteristics, habits and everyday practices, perceptions and expectations, social environments, and a number of aspects of their present school, including personal detailed assessments, relationship patterns in the school environment and their feelings as to being part of the school community (bonding to school; Berends, 1995). As to the presentation of results, we have chosen to make a descriptive exposition of some important elements so as to create predictive models.

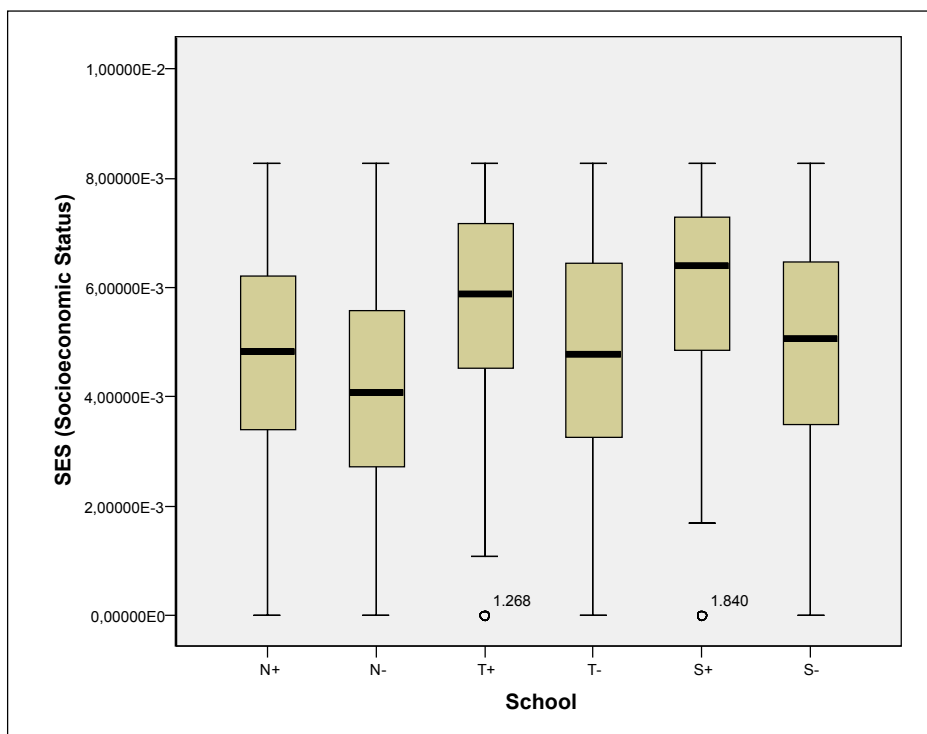
Collected data were organized in relation to the schools and a nomenclature indicating their locality in the city was used along with the signs + or – to indicate more or less prestige in a comparison between each school's geographic correspondent. In this way, we have two schools for each area of the city (Northern Rio, Southern Rio and the district of Tijuca), one with a positive image and the other with a negative image. T+ stands for a high-prestige school in the district of Tijuca. Likewise, N– refers to a low-prestige school in Northern Rio. It's possible to observe a strong socioeconomic distinction in these areas. Along with these inequalities, there are great differences in the access to public services, cultural goods etc. Lacking public goods and services, Northern Rio is the poorest area, followed by Tijuca and its surroundings. Southern Rio, on the other hand, is the most affluent area of the city, but due to the city's particular model of territorial stratification, it is possible to find slums in all studied areas, even near more consolidated urban sites. According to Ribeiro et al. (2008), apart from the distinction between the wealthier

¹² Some questions had two parts, so that a total of 200 items were included in the questionnaire.

southern zone and parts of the northern zone and the more peripheral popular spaces, a remarking characteristic of Rio de Janeiro’s segregation model is the territorial proximity and, yet, social distance among social segments that hold opposite positions in the social hierarchy. Thus, the concentration of different social segments in the territory does not imply interaction or the establishment of social ties that could enable overcoming these social distances. The presence of *favelas* (slums) throughout the city and their concentration in its wealthier parts are a clear expression of this segregation model. Therefore, we may say that all schools in our sample have students from slums and other degraded residential areas and even within these slums and other irregular occupations, there is a clear differentiation as to living standards, depending on proximity to more affluent areas of the city or to financial centre of the town.

As a start point, we will present average socioeconomic and educational levels of mothers, for these are direct indications of life standards and socioeconomic positions. As far as the educational level of mothers is concerned, we may consider those as important indicators of the cultural capital of the family. Socioeconomic levels were assessed with information on domestic goods, pondered according to their relative scarcity, then added up and standardized. Educational level of mothers was considered, instead of a richer measure including both parents, due to the lack of information on the education of male parents, especially in lower social layers.

Picture 1 – SES by School



As we can see, contrasts are clear in two different ways: in regional terms and between the schools within each area. It is important to mention that among Northern Rio schools, the N+ institution is located in a poor degraded area, where urban violence is widespread, when compared to its low-prestige correspondent. In Tijuca, the schools are not far from each other, being located in a typical middle-class neighborhood. As far as Southern Rio is concerned, the S+ institution is located in an upper-class neighborhood, with no nearby slums, whereas S– is located in a well-to-do, but less affluent area, with good access options. In this way, SES differences between schools of the same area cannot be satisfactorily explained by aspects of the geographical space they occupy. There is also another phenomenon already observed in interviews with school directors: high-prestige schools tend to attract students from other areas, whereas low-prestige schools are almost exclusively attended by students living in the neighborhood. Following the regional income distribution, average socioeconomic levels in the N+ institution is even lower than those of the S– institution. Differences are also noticeable in the direct observation of schools. Clothing and skin color corroborate with this clear impression of social disparities, even though they are not so obvious as in a comparison with students from the private and federal school systems.

Table 1

School * Color (White) Crosstabulation

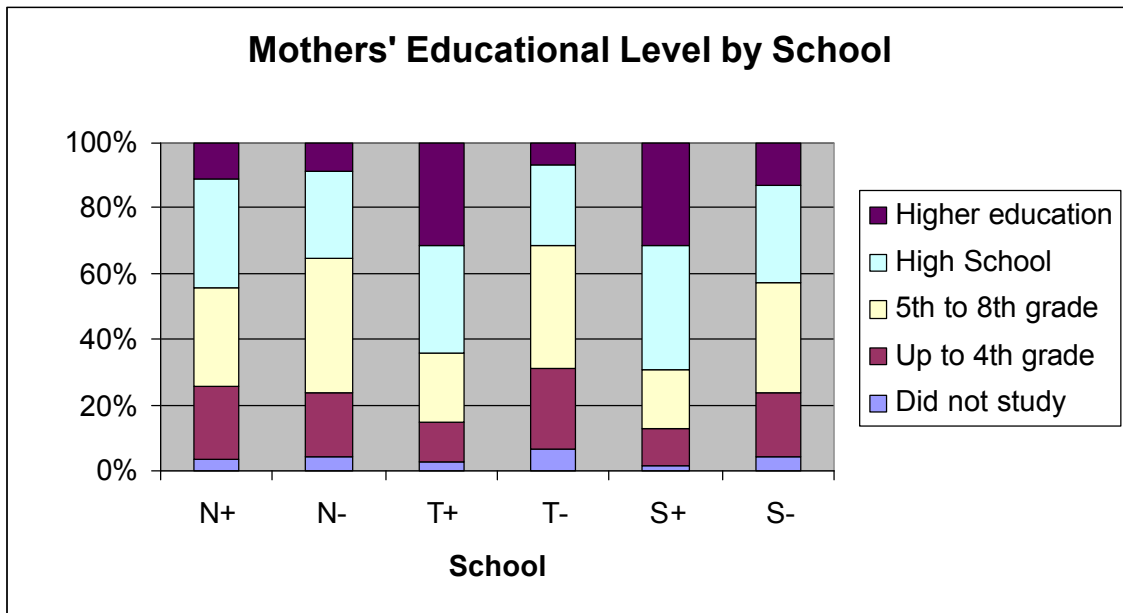
			Color	Total
School	N+	Count	202	684
		% within School	29,5%	100,0%
	N-	Count	61	257
		% within School	23,7%	100,0%
	T+	Count	183	436
		% within School	42,0%	100,0%
	T-	Count	105	297
		% within School	35,4%	100,0%
	S+	Count	170	393
		% within School	43,3%	100,0%
	S-	Count	183	583
		% within School	31,4%	100,0%
Total		Count	904	2650
		% within School	34,1%	100,0%

Self-declaration of race/skin-color among students allowed the creation of the dichotomic variable White/Asian¹³ and Others, which resulted in the table above, showing a representation of our *in loco* observation. Most students in high-prestige schools declare themselves to be White, followed by those who mention an Asian origin, whereas in Northern Rio proportions of self-declared Whites and Asians are smaller. We can use this indicator as a sign of socioeconomic differentiation, but it is also important to consider the possible occurrence of some sort of skin-color oriented segregation in the access as well as in the permanence at top-rank institutions. We actually tested this possibility in a multivariate model, but it has proven unsustainable¹⁴.

Picture 2

¹³ Municipal schools in Rio have a very small number of self-declared Asians.

¹⁴ The model of logistic regression analysis in which this hypothesis has been tested was not included here as the purpose of the present work does not consider the subject. Nevertheless, provided the importance of the theme in present discussions, we considered that a number of attempts should be made so as to find significant differentiation coefficients for skin color, being controlled by social, economical and cultural variables. Attempts were not successful, what can be seen as a positive result, going against some popular tendencies of present public policies).



We can say that, in general, the educational level of mothers fell within expected patterns and could be associated with socioeconomic aspects, but for an unexpected behavior observed in the N+ institution, where socioeconomic levels get closer to what was observed in the N– institution¹⁵. All other school pairs revealed a great distance between + schools and – schools, especially in relation to mothers with higher educational levels.

Other findings associated with family structure, religion, and the student’s self-image¹⁶ and school history as well as with the influence of peers¹⁷ also indicated differences in the composition of the student’s body in high-prestige institutions. Students attending these schools usually come from biparental families, declare to have a religion and don’t have any friends or colleagues who have quitted school. As far as their school history is concerned, rates of high-prestige school students lagging behind their peers are lower, and it is possible to find those who started school at an earlier age as compared to his classmates.

¹⁵ The N+ school is the object of deeper studies, as it presents different internal organizational patterns, putting aside the model of an “elite school” cultivated by the other + schools.

¹⁶ The student’s self-image can be interpreted as the result of socialization in environments of group pride – as in Elias & Scotson (2000)’s Winston Parva, but it may also indicate an attitude of “educational entrepreneurship”, with higher expectations and more attention to the student’s performance, which normally result in excellence of education.

¹⁷ Peer influence was measured with the question about the students having friends or colleagues that quitted school. This would be an indicator of the students’ social network.

These findings give support to the argument that there is a kind of hierarchization among schools as to the composition of the student body, and differences observed can not be explained only by geographic aspects concerning school location.

In order to observe the operation of what we call a hidden quasi-market in the municipal school system of Rio de Janeiro, logistic regressions were used to estimate factors that may explain the probability of students being sent to either high or low prestige schools. We will present models in successive steps which, besides the factors cited above, take in consideration the influence of other factors associated with the reasons behind school choice (quality, recommendations and school location).

Table 3

	Model				
	1	2	3	4	5
SES (Z)	1,33**	1,29**	1,26**	1,26**	1,28**
Educational level of mother	1,36**	1,31**	1,33**	1,30**	1,28**
Age entered 5th grade		0,77**	0,79**	0,83**	0,82**
'Professing a religion?'			1,49**	1,42**	1,34*
Type of family					
Biparental			1,84**	1,83**	1,81**
Monoparental			1,42*	1,44*	1,29
With stepfather/stepmother			1,02	1,05	1
Friends stopped studying				0,85**	0,88**
Choice: proximity					0,51**
Choice: friends recommendation					1,98**
Choice: quality of school					5,06**
Constant	0,47	11,14	3,57	3,15	1,3

Dependent variable: School Prestige (1 high or 0 low).

** p < 0,001 * p < 0,05

Coefficients presented in the table refer to Exp(B)

SES : Socioeconomic level (standardized and weighted scale of household goods)

Mother educational level: ordinal 1 to 5 (no study to higher education)

'Professing a religion?': dichotomic (1 = Yes)

Type of family: referency category is "other types"

Friends stopped studying: ordinal (1 - none a 5 - a lot)

Age entered 5th grade: whole numbers

Reasons for choice are not excludent

As expected, structural variables indicating life conditions and access to public goods had a steady representation in the models. In this way, a high education level of mothers and the family's socioeconomic status play an important role in students' access to high-prestige schools. Also important is the age of the student going to the 5th year. Chances of admittance in high-prestige schools are 20% less for each year of school disadvantage. Advantages and constraints inherent to the origin of the students are combined with elements of school life. Grade delay, school dropout and failures are realized in the age students attend to different grades. A high rate of age differences at the beginning of the 5th year, according to the kind of school, reveals the operation of selection mechanisms for admittance in this hidden quasi-market. Qualitative research indicated some of these mechanisms including tricks to “hide vacancies”, non-admittance of students coming from

bad reputation schools and the transfer of students after a subtle advice to parents about a more suitable alternative, considering the student’s profile.

In the second group of variables, religion and family structure can be considered as strictly domestic factors. The high coefficient for the claim of having a religion suggests a broad and not yet explored investigation field in Sociology of Education. As for the present paper, we do not have elements to go beyond speculation, but we reaffirm the importance of a deeper understanding, from the point of view of Sociology of Education, of the relations between religiosity – a fundamental dimension for the understanding of human behavior and choice – and educational phenomena.

On the other hand, the high coefficient of the “biparental family” variable opens another important field of study. In all models, being part of a biparental family almost duplicates the student’s chances to be sent to a high-prestige school. Considering control by a cultural capital indicator (educational level of mothers) and other strong cultural and contextual variables (social circles, self-image, reasons of school-choice, SES) the importance of this variable suggests an investigation of family/school relations going beyond approaches on cultural capital and family strategies.

Finally, the strength of the coefficients of variables concerning declared reasons for school choice highlights selective possibilities found in more prestiged schools. The types of school choice show that even though a rank of fundamental schools is not available, family choices are not simply oriented by proximity of home and school location. Also, choice due to school quality¹⁸ quintuples, whereas recommendations doubles the chances of a student being sent to a high-prestige school. Contrariwise, choices oriented by proximity of home and school location bring these chances down to 50 per cent. This reaffirms Alves’s conclusions (2007), that longer or shorter distances between home and school can be associated with the image of the school under analysis.

Qualitative survey has shown that many students travel quite long distances to attend high-prestige schools. Many of them, having realized that proximity between home and school led to the choice of a low-prestige school, decided for alternative options in distant locations. We also collected data on people’s difficulty in finding vacancies in high-prestige schools, while a number of vacancies remained unfilled in low-prestige institutions. This

¹⁸ It is also possible to understand this declared reason as a combined effect of the school reputation and socializing processes, once students of high-prestige schools are systematically in contact with a cultivated feeling of pride.

brings family aspects back to discussion, as we know that a struggle for school vacancies in Rio de Janeiro is practically null, even though it is possible to observe a struggle for vacancies in high-prestige schools. Such evidences show that, in this hidden quasi-market, school choice has its turn. Quantitative evidences are reaffirmed by reports on what is referred to as “hiding of vacancies”. Some schools, particularly high-prestige institutions allegedly adopt procedures to save vacancies during school transfer processes carried out at the end of the first segment of fundamental education¹⁹. Hidden vacancies were to be filled following procedures contrary to republican principles, including political indications and/or instances of educational bureaucracy. The same is observed as to the transfer of teachers during official transfer procedures. There are reports on schools that “hide vacancies”, possibly using discretionary methods to open way for candidates with a high social capital.

Final Considerations

The use of the concept of quasi-market in this paper does not refer to its original meaning, with a strong prescriptive aspect. Our intention was to use this concept due to its descriptive and analytical possibilities. In societies with a strong liberal tradition, the general proposition faced some opposition and has opened way to important controversies. Our analytical tradition generally opposes initiatives or propositions considering any typical marketing mechanisms in the organization of school systems. This has been observed in the strong opposition to the legitimization of the agenda of the so-called educational reform movement, since the years 1980's. Diagnoses and particularly management models that associate signals produced by comparison-oriented assessment methods with mechanisms of accountability or competitiveness generally face strong obstacles. Nevertheless, our study indicates the existence of strong competition for public schools, even among those not considered as good as high-prestige institutions in the private and federal school systems. Just like Yair has done, it is possible to observe intense inter-school and intra-school transit. Seemingly, even if it doesn't imply a support of reform policies such as those shortly mentioned here, the concept of quasi-market is able to help us understand the phenomenon under analysis.

¹⁹ There are reports giving indications that the same occurs in the transition between pre-school and elementary school.

Mechanisms of this quasi-market are not clear, provided that they are not well-informed. We could observe a strong competition among users of the public school system. School image – orally communicated and shared by students, faculty, schools employees and parents, and consolidated with rules and relationships observed in what we refer to as “school atmosphere²⁰” – is an informal indicator guiding these disputes.

Admittance to some institutions can not be taken for granted due to the economic power of contenders. The quasi-market and community policies seem to adjust to each other. Knowledge of choice options in the “regular” public school system is combined with a network of “valuable” social contacts²¹, and, of course, with the family and the student’s own expectations as to the choice of a school. We also had the strong impression that intentional school choice is an important factor for a probabilistic approach to admittance at high-prestige schools.

Finally, several researchers in the Brazilian context have invested against “choice”, based on arguments of stratification and inequality, to defend universalist and inclusive principles unsuitable to the actual organization of the system. In spite of that, as supported by Coleman, absence of choice does not prevent stratification:

“Stratification among the elementary and high schools is not absent, just because choice is not allowed; it is present in the extreme, and it is present in a form that deprives it of the incentives that stratification systems at their best bring about.”(Coleman, 1992, p. 261).

The quasi-market observed in the Brazilian context – lacking elements of the conceptual matrix that suggests its adoption as a public policy – might promote more social inequality than more clear criteria would do in an official quasi-market. In this case, there are clear rules for school choice, transparency of allocation mechanisms and efficient indicators of student’s aggregated proficiency. Previous experiences with encouragement systems based on aggregated knowledge measurements and school flux indicators can be an interesting alternative option for those paying attention to the visible immobility of educational disparity patterns in Brazil. Therefore, inter-school transit of students as well as discretionary practices at admittance need urgent attention, once these factors may disguise segregation processes, preventing a satisfactory balance between equity and

²⁰ See CUNHA (2007).

²¹ For, example, an acquaintance among school employees, even at low educational bureaucracy levels.

quality in our schools. In this case, school choice may characterize a hidden school quasi-market with a high inequity pattern.

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