

Middle Classes Families and Public Schooling in Brazil: An Atypical Reality

Research Overview:

The expansion of the private education market, combined with the decline in the quality of public schools and the deterioration of their social climate, worldwide, especially in Brazil, has led middle-class families to opt for private schooling. This article focuses on the choice of public schools by these families, a reality considered atypical.

Purpose and Methods:

This study aims to understand the reasons behind middle-class families' choice of public schools, as well as their broader educational strategies. This research was conducted through interviews with middle-class families residing in the state of Minas Gerais, Brazil, between 2020 and 2022.

Results/Discussion:

It was found that several factors led to the choice of public schooling, beyond reasons of economic constraint - which, in this research, was generated by the economic crisis brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, including job losses and drastic reductions in salaries and investments of these families.

Other families chose the public system because they perceived it as a more convivial and less competitive environment, with less emphasis on academic performance. These parents engaged in what Ball, Bowe, and Gewirtz (1996) termed "child-matching", aligning the characteristics of the child with those of the school, taking into account elements such as ethos, academic orientation, school size, and the personality, affinities, interests, and aspirations of their children.

Additionally, a recurrent reason mentioned by families is the search for "social porosity" (Van Zanten, 2009), that is, for interaction with individuals from different social, ethnic, cultural, and economic backgrounds within the school environment, in an self-interested altruism (Reay et. al. 2007). However, as observed by van Zanten, in the present study parents also tend to renounce this social porosity as their children progress through schooling. This is due both to a weakening of parental capacity to control adolescents' relationships and to increasing concerns about the perceived risks of social mixing - such as negative influences, violence, drugs, and sexuality.

Once their children are enrolled in public schools, parents employ various strategies to ensure good academic performance and to avoid potential negative effects of public schooling. These include close monitoring of their children's school life and constant vigilance over the functioning of the educational institution. Some of these strategies - such as direct contact with teachers and principals, influence over pedagogical practices and pressure for school improvements - constitute what van Zanten (2009) termed the "colonization" of educational institutions, referring to parental pressure to make schools operate in their favor.

Regardless of the reasons leading to the choice of public schooling, these middle-class families, due to their informational capital regarding the education system, make an active school choice. This means they construct a "choice set", that is, the set of schools considered by parents (Bell, 2009), and they do so because they will not consider every school in their district nor will they necessarily choose the best school. Rather, parents will select reasonable schools given their expectations of what is reasonable - which highlights the subjective nature of choice sets. The study also revealed the importance of "hot knowledge" (Ball; Vincent, 1998; Van Zanten, 2009), that is, information obtained through privileged interlocutors (by virtue of their social capital). The greater the parents' cultural capital, the greater their ability to evaluate the school market and construct these choice sets; the higher the quality of their social capital (which provides access to hot knowledge), the greater their capacity to perform child-matching. These constitute some of the advantages of the middle classes - especially the more intellectualized segments - over the lower classes (Nogueira, 2010). Furthermore, parents sometimes circumvent the school registration system by using alternative addresses to secure enrollment in their preferred schools.

Finally, although they appear to benefit from the same education as lower-income classes - since they attend the same public school system - middle-class families continue to ensure their social reproduction. For Bourdieu (1964), this consists of the conscious or unconscious transmission of accumulated capital (economic, cultural, social, symbolic), the perpetuation of social structures or relations that constitute the social order, in a kind of hereditary system. They achieve this through strategies identified in the empirical research that corroborate both Brazilian and international literature in the Sociology of Education: active school choice; practices of institutional colonization; recourse to "shadow education" (Bray, 2009) - that is, supplementary educational activities such as language classes, extra lessons, private tutoring,

etc. - and “concerted cultivation” (Lareau, 2011), a child-rearing approach characteristic of the middle classes, involving children in non-academic activities (sports, ballet, theater, music lessons, religious activities), designed to draw out children’s talents and skills, which will be useful in both their academic and professional lives.

Therefore, through their educational strategies - including school choice - families act as co-producers of educational reality and are co-responsible for educational inequalities and, ultimately, social inequalities.

References

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