

EXTENDED ACADEMIC LIFE FOR LOWER CLASS PEOPLE

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to discuss the contribution of recent studies for understanding the conditions that make extended learning paths possible in people from low-income class segments. An analysis of the results and of an interview with a student on a highly selective higher education course who comes from this background enables us to look at some of the issues. The review of studies on the subject that provide evidence of the central role of the family in extended academic learning paths also enables us to question some of the meanings commonly assigned to extended learning in working-class segments, such as conformism, suffering, and cultural disruption. The study has made it obvious that there is need for further investigation into the role of the school and into the existence of other meanings relating to school access and the experience of poor students in higher education courses.

HIGHER EDUCATION - SOCIAL CLASS – PUBLIC EDUCATION

The discussion in this article arises from the research I am carrying out for my PhD in the Psychology Institute of the University of São Paulo, where my adviser is Prof. Dr Maria Clotilde Rossetti-Ferreira, to whom I extend my thanks for her suggestions. I would also like to thank Bianca C. Correa for reading the paper and for her contributions.

Research into successful academic learning paths among those from working-class backgrounds, on the other hand, like that by Setton (1999) and Souza (1991), who point out the scant knowledge that exists about them and the need for new investigations, is less frequent. However, principally in the 1990s, works appeared in Brazil that tried to transform extended academic learning paths¹ in people from working-class segments into the object of study². As an example of this we can mention the work of Vianna (1998), Portes (2000), Silva (1999) and Barbosa (2004). These studies investigate both the processes that allowed young people from working-class segments to enter higher education, by mainly looking at family schooling practices, as well as the experience of the poor student in the university, by investigating access to this level of education, as well as permanence in it.

In this sense the purpose of this article is to discuss the contributions of these other pieces of research to our understanding of the conditions that enable extended academic learning paths in people from low-income segments as well as raising some of the issues relating to studies into poor students in universities. This is done by an analysis of the results of previous research and an interview we carried out with a young student from a working-class background who is studying on a highly selective course at the University of São Paulo. We intend, therefore, to point out the contributions and some of the challenges that exist about any investigation into the access and permanence of students from low-income working-class segments in higher education. The article is based on a review of the works of Vianna (1998), Portes (2000), Silva (1999) and Barbosa (2004), which provided evidence of the importance of family actions in extended academic learning paths and the central role of the family as a research object. This review also enabled us to question some of the meanings commonly attributed to long-term learning by those from working-class segments, such as conformism, suffering and cultural break; in these research projects, we came across other possible meanings for the experience of poor students in higher education. These different meanings are also illustrated in an interview that forms part of the research we are carrying out on this theme. Before discussing the research of Vianna (1998) and Portes (2000),

¹ By extended learning paths we understand this to mean remaining in the school system up to and including higher education.

² Abroad, particularly in scientific literature in French, knowledge production on this theme is less recent. However, Brazilian research will be substantially considered within the scope of this paper.

however, it is appropriate to briefly present the work of French sociologist, Bernard Lahire, whose theoretical and methodological assumptions are to be found in our investigations.

SUCCESSFUL ACADEMIC LIFE AND THE FAMILY

Lahire (1997) investigates the relationship between the academic situation of 26 children coming from low-income working-class segments who are in the 2nd grade of elementary education in France, and their family backgrounds. In the profiles described in his research there are cases that range from expected “failures” – in other words, difficult school realities experienced by students whose parents have very little schooling - unqualified professionals, which characterizes a situation of low cultural capital³ –, to stories of improbable “failures” – in other words, children, who despite living in condition that are more favorable to their being adequately educated (their parents have a better level of education, for example), academically perform fairly badly –, and even brilliant “success” cases, of students who, although they are subject to extremely difficult conditions as far as their academic work is concerned, have an ideal school performance. Despite a similarity in the social origin and living conditions, the courses run by the academic paths of these children are heterogeneous and multiple. It is on the reasons for these improbabilities that Lahire ponders.

Despite the fact that Lahire does not always call the dimension of many of the issues he discusses ‘psychology’, this is precisely what is being dealt with when he looks, for example, at how the fears and suffering of parental school experiences have an influence over the relationship children establish with the school. The importance assumed by the psychological aspect leads him to state that, between a low or non-existent cultural capital and a higher level of education marked by unhappy experiences, the former situation is preferable: “It is undoubtedly preferable to have parents with no school capital than to have parents who suffered at school and harbour anxieties, shame, complexes, remorse, traumas or blockages” (Lahire, 1997, p.345).

³ The concept of cultural capital, which comes from the works of Pierre Bourdieu, (1996), is defined by Lahire (1997) as the most appropriate or closest socializing principle to the academic world

It is this psychological heritage that explains some of the improbable school “success” stories⁴. Such is the case, for example, of Salima. She is the daughter of immigrant parents (from Algeria); the mother is an illiterate cleaning woman and the father an electricity worker; He can only read in Arabic and a little (with difficulty) in French. Salima, despite having within her the objective conditions that would probably lead to failure at school, got 7.2 in the national assessment and is considered a good student by her teacher. According to Lahire, it is the combination of characteristics of the family background in this case that makes it possible to explain her unexpected success.

If the reasons for success cannot be found in the reading and writing practices or in the organization of the family’s domestic activities, the author looks for them in the relationship the father establishes with his children, principally as far as academic activities are concerned. Despite Salima’s father not being able to say what class his children study in (she has two brothers), nor being able to help them with their homework, he values education, makes sure they do their homework and encourages them to get involved with academic activities, by taking them to the library or to buy books. He also encourages them to keep a diary during vacation time and expresses “his regret about those practices he would have liked to have been able to do” (Lahire, 1997, p. 169). In this sense the bonds between the father and his children also includes writing; it is no coincidence, therefore, that Salima wishes to be a “scribbler”: “The children know they give the father pleasure if they do well at school, and they write for him” (Lahire, 1997, p. 169).

This is one of the cases described by Lahire, in which the characteristics of family organization explain successful academic learning paths when there is a total or partial lack of cultural capital. For this author, stories like that of Salima is evidence of how important the economy of power relations within families is. Even in cases in which the parents have a certain cultural capital, something more than this capital is transferred. In this sense some of the stories of improbable “failures” can be understood considering the relationship the parents have with their own school experiences. Adults may have feelings of inferiority or cultural

⁴ Despite the relative importance that Lahire (1997) attributes to the notions of academic “success” and “failure” – always taking care to place these terms between inverted commas –, for defining the profiles, the parameter used was the marks obtained by children in the national assessment of the French teaching system. Pupils who were considered to be academically “successful” got marks higher than 6.

incompetence vis-à-vis the school institution and transmit these to their children. The inverse may also occur and produce stories of unexpected “success”, like that of Salima. In this case parents transmit to their children feelings of pride and joy vis-à-vis their school experience. However, in both situations this is a heritage of feelings:

Family ‘heritage’, therefore, is also a question of feelings [...], and the influence on the children’s education of the ‘transmission of feelings’ is important, since we know that social relationships, due to the multiple predictive injunctions they engender, produce effects of very real individual beliefs. (Lahire, 1997, p. 173)

Furthermore, so that the “transmission” of the cultural capital can occur, both effective and affective interactions are necessary. In other words, the educational level of the father and mother is not enough; it is necessary that the holder of this academic capital is available both objectively as well as subjectively, in such a way as to make suitable conditions possible so that the capital might be inherited. In the absence of cultural capital, what the stories that are reported show is that a symbolic place of great importance to the school world or the literate child is created within these families; interest and value are shown in little actions on a day to day basis.

When we read the profiles described by Lahire (1997), we begin to find out about many of the objective and subjective realities experienced by the families he interviewed.

Nevertheless, despite the fact that the teachers of the children were also interviewed, we know little about the school. About the teachers, for example, only their opinions about the pupils and their academic performance are mentioned.

The specific interest of Lahire in this research was the relationship of the families from working-class segments with situations of learning success and failure. Even so, the absence of the school in the analysis undertaken attracts is notable. The school institution is briefly mentioned in some of the footnotes. The “irregular success” of Martine – the daughter of parents who completed high school, who got a 7 in the national assessment in the 2nd grade, but who had to repeat her pre-school year and whose good performance in the 2nd grade is inconstant – is attributed to the fact that it is the father, who is less fond of reading and similar school activities than the wife, who looks after his daughter while his wife goes to work. In this analysis the author only mentions in a footnote a fact that perhaps merits more attention: “We can observe that part of the responsibility for Martine’s irregular “success” must lie with

the school itself due to the many changes of teacher in Martine's class (eight teachers in one school year...)" (Lahire, 1997, p. 324, note 43). An understanding of the participation of the school in the issues discussed is explained, at least partially, in the conclusions, albeit once more in a footnote:

It is necessary to add that if the objective of our research is the dissonance and consonance between school socialization and family socialization, accentuating specific aspects - the pressures that are peculiar to family backgrounds - the school also undoubtedly plays a part in the production of some of the misunderstandings that compromise with the children's learning process (Lahire, 1997, p. 354, note 1).

As an example of a "misunderstanding", the author quotes the free-time period when many children remain in the school after class to do homework. Because they fully trust the learning institution the parents do not check their children's exercise books for themselves, believing that the lessons are complete and correct since the children have been helped by competent professionals, which is not always the case. The reference to research within the context of the French teaching system does not ignore the differences between this system and the reality of Brazilian public education.

We believe, however, that the school has a bigger participation in causing about academic failure than the contribution made by "misunderstandings". In the case of Brazil this participation has been widely discussed in various works, such as, for example, those of Patto (1990), Spósito (1993), Paro (1995), Collares & Moysés (1996), Sawaya (1999) and Cruz (1997), who revealed the daily school processes and practices that play their part in causing academic failure.

EXTENDED ACADEMIC LEARNING AND LOW-INCOME WORKING-CLASS SEGMENTS: TWO BRAZILIAN STUDIES

The research carried out by Vianna (1998) and Portes (2001) deal with the relationship between prolonged academic learning paths and people from low-income working-class segments.

Vianna (2000) interviewed seven students (five men and two women) who had in common the fact that they had gone on to higher education (graduate and post-graduate

students in universities in Minas Gerais) and had come from families with economic difficulties and a low educational level, with parents who were doing (or had done) predominantly manual labor.

In analysing these school biographies Vianna raises important reflections about the relationship between extended learning and working-class segments. One of these reflections corresponds to the presence in the stories analysed of “partial school success”, defined as good academic performance and no ‘failed/repeated’ years, above all in the period relative to the first four grades in elementary school. These initial and intermediate successes contributed to the construction of meanings, dispositions and practices that tended to reinforce them, becoming an important basis for continuing studies along the paths that were analysed.

Another recurring aspect was the interviewees’ decisive self-determination to continue along the academic learning path. Vianna (2000) recognizes the existence of a random component in such paths, due to the casual appearance of opportunities that are central to the definition process. Despite this she attributes an active role to the individuals in the construction of their learning path: “These paths suppose undaunted wanting and self-determination, above all on the part of the children, a sine qua non condition for academic survival in working-class environments” (Vianna, 2000, p. 52). However, the author emphasizes that this is not a question of locating such self-determination in the subjective essence of the interviewees, because it was constructed over the course of the learning process.

Vianna also discusses the concept of family learning mobilization, understood as family attitudes and practices directed systematically and intentionally at guaranteeing the children have a good academic performance. Similar to what was found by Lahire (1997), the author observes that extended academic learning is possible in people from low-income working-class segments without this mobilization necessarily occurring. In the seven stories analysed she identified no specific and deliberate investments on the part of the families in their children’s academic lives that allowed her to explain these extended academic learning situations. She defends the idea that the presence of the families from working-class segments in the prolonged academic paths of their children assumes specific forms that are very different from those commonly identified as providing the conditions of “success”, that are typical of middle class segments in society.

It is a fact that parents contribute to expand academic learning paths, but not by “very carefully accompanying their children’s education” or from “frequent contacts with the teachers”, nor by “always appearing at meetings arranged by the school”. The participation of families in their children’s academic lives is revealed, for example, in the story of Catarina (a teacher doing a specialization course in psycho-pedagogy at the Federal University of Minas Gerais – UFMG), whose father, who is quite old and suffering from health problems, used to work overtime at the school as a cleaner in order to ensure that his children were exempt from the monthly school fees.

The author also deals with the role of the different spheres that go to make up the paths analysed: the family, student-child and the school, understood as interdependent environments. She restates the positions discussed about the family and the child and looks at the participation of the school in the issue of extended learning. Although she recognizes that aspects linked to the teaching institution and its functioning are related to the path researched and despite conceiving of “the school [...] as a dynamic factor in the process of constructing these school survival situations”, the author clarifies that in her study the school only appears indirectly, as an “important figure on the sidelines”.

Actually the school institution assumed a position of major importance in several of the stories analysed. Such is the case, for example, of Helena, a medical student at the Federal University of Minas Gerais. The fact that she studied in the municipal school system in Belo Horizonte, recognized as offering good quality education and receiving orientation from teachers from the best schools, is indicated by Vianna (1998) as one of the decisive elements for Helena’s highly successful academic path. Going to a good municipal school right at the start of her education (made possible because she had an uncle who worked as a security guard in the institution) is identified as a great opportunity in Helena’s school life, which allowed her access to other equally good quality schools.

Furthermore, in the analysis of Vianna (2000), the school plays an important role; she indicates success in the first grades of elementary school, for example, as being central to starting to construct an extended academic learning path, or she states that the self-determination observed in her interviewees was constructed throughout the academic process. Therefore, despite the objective of the research being mainly directed at the family’s contribution to prolonged academic learning paths Vianna (1998) also provides important

input for thinking about the participation of the school⁵ in constructing these stories. Despite the school not being the focus of the research and, due to this, not being the object of greater reflection, its role was prominent in several of the extended academic learning paths analysed.

Another study that investigates the relationship between extended learning and low-income working-class segments is that of Portes (2000). The researcher interviewed six young people (three men and three women) coming from working-class families who were students on the most competitive courses at UFMG (Medicine, Physiotherapy, Law, Social Communication, Electrical Engineering and Computer Science). These students, despite their brilliant learning paths, marked always by success, are, according to the author, a “statistical improbability”, since extremely few students from low-income working-class segments have access to these courses.

One of the research objectives was to understand the school work done by families from the working-classes that in some way contributed to the success of their children in public universities on courses that are socially highly valued⁶. Portes (2000) defines school work as any occasional or poorly organized family action aimed at helping their children enter and remain in the teaching system, by trying to influence their learning path in such a way as to help them achieve higher educational levels. This type of work is somewhat complex, difficult to understand, not very apparent and mostly carried out in the absence of learning capital.

An example of the variety of forms that school work assumes in poorer environments is the story of Maurício (an Electrical Engineering student). Faced with the great difficulty of corresponding to the economic needs that his son’s course demands his father, who had left his employment in a hospital to work at scraping and varnishing wooden floors to increase the family income, says to the researcher: “ ‘Look, there are days when I despair..... To have some idea of what it’s like, just take a look at this...’ He raises the torn bottoms of his pants and shows his knees that are scraped and calloused because he works, kneeling down (...), as if he needed to demonstrate the effort he does to maintain his home, as he puts it” (Portes, 2000, p. 66).

⁵ When we use the term ‘school’ we are referring to periods that correspond to elementary and high school education.

⁶ This was one of the aspects dealt with by Portes (2001) in his Ph.D. thesis.

This school work becomes visible and gains sense and legitimacy through a series of actions which comprise what the author calls the “set of operating circumstances”. He deals with six circumstances:

1. The presence of domestic moral order;
2. Attention to the child’s school work;
3. An effort to understand and support the child;
4. The presence of another in the life of the student;
5. The search for material help;
6. The existence and importance of a lasting support group, built up within the learning establishment.

Despite Portes’ discussion being directed at the actions of the family in the academic learning path of their children, at least one of the circumstances discussed refers explicitly to the school. With regard to the fourth item dealt with – the presence of another in the life of the student –, in the stories told this ‘other’ is always a teacher⁷. This is how, for example, the path of Alice (a physiotherapy student) will take a decisive direction when her 3rd grade teacher asks the mother to transfer her to a different, better quality public school. The perception about good academic performance on the part of certain teachers seems to be decisive in the life of the students interviewed, performing an important role in the construction of a “success logic” (Accardo, 1997). Portes (2000) states that this type of teachers’ intervention is accepted and operationalized by the families, changing the students’ academic learning possibilities. The students, in turn, continue to develop, thereby confirming previous prognostications, receiving new praise and going in the direction of higher levels of learning.

The “eternal approximation of the teachers” (Portes, 2000) is the other important aspect in the academic paths analysed. Due to the recognition and the encouragement to dedication, effort and academic performance the teacher contributes towards building security

⁷ With the exception of the Esdras case (a Computer Science student) in which this “other” is represented by his cousin, who is a teacher, the owner of a school where he is going to study and act as a monitor in exchange for not paying the monthly fees

and self-esteem in these students. Furthermore, according to Portes, the search to get closer to the teachers or for recognition within the school is encouraged by families as a way of delegating the care that they can no longer exercise relative to their children. Such recognition, however, can only be obtained by an exemplary performance, not only in academic, but also in behavioral terms, and by acceptance of institutional decisions. This attitude on the part of students Portes (2000) calls “strategic conformism”.

As in the research carried out by Vianna (1998), in the study by Portes, (2000) the school was present at important times in the paths that were analysed, despite not having constituted a focus of the investigation. In Portes’ discussion, however, the academic institution appeared in a more expressive manner. In any event, it is worth highlighting the presence in both studies of the school when it came to constructing the paths that led poor students to higher education.

In this sense we ask ourselves whether there is not a need for a more lengthy investigation into the participation of the school in the construction of extended academic learning paths in people from low-income working-class segments. Does the school institution participate in this construction? What kind of participation is it? How does it happen? What do we think about such participation, given the precarious state of the quality of Brazilian public education? These are questions that remain open and for which, in our opinion, new research into the subject is necessary.

BEYOND CONFORMISM AND RUPTURE

As we have already stated, research into successful learning paths in people from low-income working-class segments is less frequent than studies dealing with academic failure. In existing research into the theme, cases of poor students with good academic performance are often understood as “conformism”, in the sense that these students are those who conform to the school’s values and calmly submit to the teachers, adapting themselves perfectly to the rules and regulations of the institution.

Observing a class that was considered to be “weak”, Patto (1990) refers to those children held to be “good students” as those who do what the teacher orders them to in an exemplary way, giving up their own desires and individuality. In the class in which “good students” are in a majority (in a class held to be “strong”) this author highlights the docility, saying that the children are successful due to their submission and efficiency in doing what is

asked of them. Drawing attention to the psychological cost of such a submission to academic order, Patto talks about the suffering and impoverishment of the personality that might result from the attempt of the child to please the teacher by adjusting herself to his expectations and to the ideal of the “good student”.

Nicolaci-da-Costa (1987) also considers the possible existence of subjective problems for members of low-income working-class segments with a good school performance. Understanding such problems as the result of a “culture shock” between school and family the author says that the academic success of students from poor backgrounds has the power of robbing them of their cultural identity⁸.

However, we question this: are these exclusive aspects of successful learning paths in people from low-income working-class segments? Would the “good student” correspond to the prototype of total submission to school rules? Some researchers help provide a ‘no’ reply.

Hammersley & Turner (1984) state that when the behavior of “good students” is more closely observed, clearly the “conformist” classification is just a simplification. The authors question this characterization, starting from a very simple, but almost always ignored question: conformity to what? Various works that attest to this conformity are based on a homogenizing notion of supposed “middle class” values among teachers, to which Hammersley & Turner counter-argue, paying attention to the fact that various segments of middle-class layers exist among teachers.

What is more, according to the authors, even a student who might be called “conformist” is sometimes different in his behavior: he does not “conform” the whole time. It is necessary to understand the behavior of students by considering the moment and the situation in which it occurs; this understanding must be prioritised in detriment to the search for a level of general adaptation to the school. They also discuss the fact that the student’s adaptation will depend on the response model proposed by the teacher, which may therefore vary. It should not be understood as total submission, to the extent that it always involves the active participation of the student. In this sense they say that much of what is understood as conformity to school demands is motivated by instrumental concerns, such as, for example,

⁸ Although this statement raises the need to discuss the issue of popular culture, this debate is not in line with the objective of this paper. With regard to this, consult Bosi (2005), Bosi (2004), Sader & Paoli (1997) and Chauí (1993).

getting good marks. Therefore, good work may be much more a calculated strategy than simply the result of socialization that is perfectly adapted to school rules.

This statement is close to the expression used by Portes (2000) – “strategic conformism” – when describing the behavior of students (exemplary, both with regard to the academic as well as behavioral aspect), which aimed at recognition by the teachers. This recognition proved to have an important role to play in the construction of learning paths that led such students to the most competitive higher education courses in a public university. It seems that this is what Hammersley & Turner refer to when they talk about a “calculated strategy”.

Research that offers another possible way of understanding what conformism means, understanding it as “strategic conformism”, is that of Silva (1999). This researcher interviewed eleven poor students who had in common the fact that they lived in a slum in Rio de Janeiro and had done a university course.

In his conclusions about the dynamic of the academic field, Silva (1999), using the concepts of Bourdieu (1983, 1989), states that one of the explanatory factors for permanence in school and achieving higher levels of academic learning is the position held by the interviewees, both in the family and academic fields. About the latter the author attributes the position achieved by the students to their “institutional intelligence”, rather than to any cognitive competences. This type of intelligence is defined as the capacity to understand and know how to play to the rules of the academic field. Socially constructed concepts, such as intelligence, reveal more than mere conformism: it can hide an acute sensitivity to the institutional game. Examples of this intelligence appear in several of the stories told. “Good cultural will”, which is the little understood assimilation of various pieces of input transmitted by the school, because it is believed that it will be important in the future, is one of them. Another example is the effort to get good marks, as reported by some of the interviewees, even when they questioned the relevance of certain pieces of academic content in their lives. Finally, there is the option to not face up to, or “clash head on with” the teachers.

Another characteristic that is also amazing in studies that deal with extended academic learning in people from low-income working-class segments is the fact that, in general, it is understood within a vision that focuses predominantly on the rupture or the culture shock arising from the difference between the academic world and the family world and the suffering, humiliation and psychological damage resulting from this.

Among the researches mentioned here, that of Vianna (2000) pays attention to extended learning experienced as a rupture and suffering in working-class segments. In an article that is a summary of her Ph.D. thesis the author discusses issues that might be called of a psychological order. Psychological difficulties, resulting from the cultural and social distancing from the family world as longer academic learning paths are trodden, are presented in several of the biographies analysed. Suffering may be experienced both in the context of the academic experience as well as in family relationships.

However, once again, we ask ourselves: what are the psychological costs of an extended academic learning path? And the benefits? Are extended learning paths always the source of suffering? What difficulties and what possibilities do access to and permanence in a public university bring to poor students?

In Vianna (1998), we encounter meanings that, although not present in the conclusions presented by the researcher, offer another possible understanding of the theme in question. Of the seven biographies analysed, in at least four the author states that the cultural emancipation provided by entering a university is not experienced by students as a break from the family group. An example of this is the story of Helena, a medical student at UFMG, whose father works as a butcher and was only educated to the 3rd grade of elementary education, and whose mother, a housewife, completed elementary school. According to Vianna, the student is authorized to distance herself from her parents without feeling she has transgressed because she acknowledges the legitimacy of their story; she always has her origin as an important point of support. A similar case is that of Luís, a philosophy student at the Higher Education Foundation of São João Del-Rey, the son of a semi-illiterate father, who is a manual laborer, and whose mother works as a housemaid and washer-woman. According to Vianna, the student's source of subjective energies for his academic learning path was an understanding of the specific nature of the academic universe and its difference relative to the family. The researcher states that at no time in her contact with Luis did she perceive that learning and emancipating himself culturally from his family might have signified transgression for him. Olga, a Masters student in education at UFMG, who lost her father (a mechanic) when she was 7 and whose mother worked as a general helper in the school and had finished first grade only as an adult student, is another example of cultural emancipation without any associated suffering. The mother, whose dream was to see her children become qualified teachers, symbolically "consented" for them to go as far as possible in their studies. So, according to

Vianna (1998), Olga was authorized to take maximum advantage of the opportunities offered by the university without experiencing this as a transgression, which is illustrated when she talks about her experiences at UFMG, where according to her expression, she “was like a fish in water”. The story of Catarina, a teacher doing a specialization course in psycho-pedagogy at the State University of Minas Gerais, the oldest daughter in a family of 11, with an illiterate mother, a housewife, and a father who did not finish elementary education and is a farm labourer, is another example of emancipation not experienced as rupture. According to Vianna, Catarina’s struggle for learning (she learnt to read with Mobral [former Brazilian literacy program], and concluded 4th grade when she was 17) was helped by the inter-subjective family relationships and her academic process was not experienced as transgression.

In the examples mentioned above, unlike what studies frequently state about the theme, the fact that students coming from low-income working-class segments got into university did not mean they suffered as far as their relationship with their families was concerned. On the contrary, the research we are carrying out has shown us that, additionally, the entry of a child into university often brings positive changes to the families, too. Above and beyond the pride and joy of the parents the students report changes in some family habits, the establishment of another type of relationship and greater acceptance of certain behavior.

A work that also points to another direction for extended academic learning for people from low-income working-class segments is that of Barbosa (2004). The researcher, interested in understanding how poor students experience this condition in a public university, discusses two meaning possibilities: this may be experienced as a humiliating situation or as an encounter and revelation. The transit between two socially and culturally different realities may cause both an uprooting as well as an exchange of influences in these students.

Barbosa interviewed three former students from the University of São Paulo (USP), who had in common the fact that they all came from low-income working-class segments. Initially, he was hoping to obtain memories of the humiliation they had experienced during their undergraduate years; this was not, however, what the researcher predominantly heard in the reports.

It was from what one of the interviewees said (Regina, a former student of the psychology course, someone professionally established and doing a Ph.D. in the area) that the author could broaden her outlook and perceive that the situation of poor students in public

universities is not just one of the suffering and humiliation. When talking about her day to day life in the university Regina, who comes from a poor neighbourhood on the outskirts of São Paulo, is emphatic when she says that this consisted not only in suffering. In fact, suffering existed above all about her feeling of being incapable of doing some of the academic tasks and in her day by day coexistence with her classmates. However, despite this, the former student says that she had fun and took a lot of advantage of all that the campus and university life had to offer her. She refuses to see poor people as unfortunate or for whom we should feel pity; when she talks, poverty seems to be an obstacle to be overcome, but also a possibility for growth. Regina even states that this situation is valid as a way of distinguishing oneself in the university during undergraduate years. Questioned about what had most changed in her life when she went to USP, she replies that it was access to another cultural life, lived as enrichment and not as a substitution of her family experience. Barbosa points out that perhaps entry to university helped this student assume her economic and cultural situation more calmly, without denying or renouncing her wish to learn and grow more. We would also add that access to some situations and practices that the university world provides, such as theoretical discussions, participation in the student movement and in artistic events and contact with different people, seems to have contributed to preparing her social origin in a better way. Therefore, Regina's university experience shows that, despite situations of humiliation, there is a possibility of "reacting to this type of blow, drawing from it value, power and knowledge of that which, in humiliation, seems only to be disadvantage, weakness and ignorance" (Barbosa, 2004, p. 259). This story illustrates that extended academic learning in people from low-income working-class segments is not only made up of suffering and humiliation.

Below, we present what was said to us in an interview by a young man coming from a working-class background and a student on a highly selective course at the University of São Paulo with regard to some of the issues raised here.

Marcos⁹ path: difficulties and possibilities

Marcos, 27, is a student in the fourth year of the Psychology course at USP. He comes from out of São Paulo city and has lived in student accommodation on the campus for all of the four years.

His story tells us of how difficult it is for a poor student to enter and to remain in a public university and of how much he suffers, but also of how happy he is, his triumphs and the possibilities that entry to such an institution represented for him.

The son of a retired security guard for FEPASA and a housewife, both educated to the 4th grade of elementary school, Marcos is the oldest of four children, one 24, one 23 and a sister of 8. He has no idea what education his grandparents had. He only remembers that his paternal grandmother was a “very simple person” and that his paternal grandfather worked for the Rural Trade Union. On his mother’s side, his grandfather worked as a lathe operator and security guard and his grandmother was a housewife.

Marcos completed his elementary education in a state school and high-school at the Police Force, which was also attended by the children of civilians. He says that he was always an average student, whose performance was good in the arts subjects and with a regular or poor performance in science subjects. His memories of his early years are negative, because the 1st grade teacher was very strict; his mother used to go to the school a lot, and so he thought he had some learning and reading difficulty. Despite these bad memories, of all the children he was the one who did best at school and today is the only one studying at university. One of his brothers is in the police, the other is a waiter and both finished high-school.

His parents always highly valued study: his mother was always alert to and careful about his homework, and she went to the school a lot, while his father insisted on guaranteeing financial support for the home while his children were studying. As far as he was concerned, however, studies ended at high-school. Marcos had to work to pay for a pre-university entry exam course with the aim of getting to university. Furthermore, if his father had helped him with the expenses for his university entry course, he would have had to do the same for his two brothers, which was impossible.

⁹ Fictitious name.

When he finished high school Marcos tried to get into the State University of Campinas to study Scenic Arts and was turned down. This was the start of a long road and the first of eleven university entrance exams over a five year period, trying to get into a public university, and subsequently to study psychology, until he passed the FUVEST (Entrance Exam Foundation, University of São Paulo) exam. To pay for his studies he worked in a ‘Every item R\$ 1.99’ store, as a supervisor in the census of the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), but most of the time as a waiter in a café and pub.

This student’s path to university is marked by great perseverance and a lot of tiring hard work. Besides a lack of preparation in terms of specific knowledge to overtake the entry exam Marcos talks about a more general lack of preparation: he did not know what the entry exam was, or what it was to compete for a place in a public university, he did not know how he should prepare for the exam, what it was to study, nor how he should do it. This lack of preparation reflects his lack of “information capital”, also observed by Silva (1999) in research with university students who live in the Maré slum in Rio de Janeiro¹⁰. In short, Marcos was even unaware of what he lacked in order to achieve what he was aiming for. The difficulties he faced were such and the effort and fatigue so great that when he passed the entry exam his feeling was one of the relief and not happiness.

When he arrived at the USP campus he came to face a very different world from his own reality up until that point in time. On the day he enrolled, he was given the nickname “independent freshman”, because he came from another town, on his own, while the other new students, particularly those from outside the municipality, always came accompanied by their parents. On this same day, during lunch, they asked him if he worked because he had the “look” of someone who already did. The contrast between these two worlds – his own and that of the university – became obvious at the first party for freshmen: his feeling of not belonging there was so big that he wished he had had a tray in his hands so he would know how to act. The feeling expressed by Marcos about this is also seen in another research on this theme¹¹:

¹⁰ See also Mitrulis; and Penin (2006).

¹¹ See, for example, Zago (2006).

It was very complicated for me at the beginning; to be studying with people whom I used to serve in the bar. It was very funny on the first day [...], there was this huge party, all the freshmen and women. The previous year had been very tiring for me, very stressful. I had had practically no social life. All I wanted at that moment in time, was to have a tray in my hands so I'd know what to do (he laughs. In that party I noticed how I was, I don't know, a bit out of place, as if I wasn't - I don't quite know how to put this - in that world yet; it wasn't mine yet. I wanted a tray and I saw a friend of mine, a very big friend of mine, complaining and upset because he didn't have a mobile phone to get into the Internet, while my concern was: "What am I going to eat? How am I going to support myself here?" You know, I thought it was very different, with people asking me to go out with them and me thinking: "Where are they going? Am I going to have enough money to spend, or not?"

His day by day life and contact with his classmates was "very difficult", in the words of Marcos, particularly at the beginning of the course. By getting into USP, he started studying with people he had served in the restaurant-pub; he was now coexisting with people who used to spend in one night what he earned in a month as a waiter. In addition to the episode of the colleague who was concerned with the Internet while Marcos was worried about what he was going to eat, other facts narrated by this young man marked the social distance existing between him and his colleagues, such as, for example, in a moment of light relief when colleagues offered their parents' work as a birthday present to another female colleague (a medical or psychological consultation) Marcos asked if he should ask his father if he would look after something for her. In this clash of such dissimilar realities, the student tried to reaffirm his story and sought support in what he called his "wronged proletariat discourse". This discourse was crucial when it came to helping him in the task of finding a place in this new world that was being presented to him. However, according to his own assessment, his coexistence with his colleagues was even more complicated: he was relating to a representation and not to people who were his companions in higher education. If on the one hand asserting himself as a student-worker was good, because it helped him face up to the new situation, on the other it was bad, since it made real coexistence with others difficult. Marcos talks about this clash of worlds:

...I was studying to enter here or enter another public university, not necessarily here. I didn't have an idea of entering USP, but I felt I was swimming against the tide because the people I was competing against were sleeping better than I was, they were eating better than I was (he laughs) they had more time than I had, and so it's a very unfair fight. When I came here I came up against these people who were my competitors. For their part, too, I think this issue of me imposing myself in this sense was very

obvious, also, [...] this thing of establishing who I was, how I wanted to carry a tray to show who I was or when I was the independent freshman or the freshman who works to establish who I was. They wanted to say that they studied at C. [private school] in order to say who they were [...] because they wanted to go to the most popular bars in the city, to party after parties, except now without their mothers and fathers, to expensive parties, wasting Mummy and Daddy's money. So, in this sense I was shocked at them saying who they were, because these were the people I served when I was working; they were the ones who were at the table spending in one night what I earned in a month. Therefore, that was shocking...

During the course, however, Marcos reports that he changed his attitude about many things, including to his classmates. In his own words, he realized the “wand effect”. He says that at the beginning of the course he went to a lot of parties, drank a lot of beer (a habit he did not have before going to university) telephoned his parents' house less, dedicated himself less to the course and somehow stopped being the “good lad”, the “good son”, the “good student”. Having experienced what he calls “the other side”, he has now found a balance. For example, he manages to understand that if some details of a graduation party are totally dispensable, as far as he is concerned, for some people they may be extremely important. One of his best friends today is the colleague who complained about the Internet while Marcos was worrying about what he was going to eat.

But getting onto the Psychology course at the University of São Paulo did not only mean shock, clashes and suffering. On the contrary, access to a public university represented for the student a complete transformation in his life, “a U-turn”, as he puts it:

[getting into USP represented] a U-turn in my life, I think. I think it made all the difference. [...] a lot of things that had stopped making sense to me started making sense again. My anxiety was no longer about the lack of possibilities, because back in U. [city where he was born], working as a waiter at night in the pub, Oh, I don't know perhaps it is even despising other people, but I used to look at a guy, one of the older waiters, and I used to think: “Shit! That guy's been here 15 years. He was here 15 years ago and in the future 10 or 15 years he'll still be here.” And it was a guy that got involved. He was the head waiter; he got involved with his work, but he had no professional prospects any more, because the service didn't offer them. The guy was older, so he'd already become reconciled to a load of things. He no longer had a family – he hadn't looked after that either and ... [he gestures being kicked out]: “Shit, that's not what I want for my life!” I used to really look at my friends, who were more or less the same age as me, who studied with me; some of those who could pay were at college and those who couldn't were working in an office of some sort, earning at most their two minimum salaries. That's when I mapped out my path until. I have no idea: “Ah, I know, I'm going to find a job where I earn my two

minimum salaries; I'm going to fight like a mad man to succeed in paying for a private university, just to have the qualification that I'm not even going to use; just to try and arrange a job that's just a bit better. I'm going to meet some mad woman there, and I'm going to have my own children and..." you know? No prospects! When I got here there was such a wide range of choices that I felt anxious; there were so many things to do, so many possibilities, so many new things, right? Goodness, I was in a daze at the outset, lost. I was also talking to friends the other day and saying how USP provides us with things! Even basic things, right? Trips, student get-together; how many people have I met because I'm here at USP, how many places have I visited? Why am I telling you the story of my life at this moment in time? Why am I at USP?the vision that people have of me today, because I'm here at USP. Much of what I am today is because I'm at USP. Therefore, USP's a bit like a mother-figure. Of course it has a lot of problems, and I criticise it I bad-talk it a heck of a lot, but it has been a catalyst of possibilities for me. I think this would define USP for me today; it catalyzed a load of possibilities for me in my life; I feel that I wiped out those five years I was not here, that I didn't manage to get in, when I worked hard, I suffered, goodness! What did I do in those five years? They were five years when I felt very lost, from when I was 18 to 23...

For example, entering the public university represented the possibility of resurrecting previous knowledge, like philosophies and the theatre that had been devalued in the entry exam course and pushed to one side in his work as a waiter. What in these other areas made no difference, in the university was taken advantage of and allowed Marcos to enter a research group into the History of Psychology and to participate in the university's theatre group. Entering a public university also meant making another prospect in life feasible for Marcos. Without access to free higher education the student had been contemplating a path in life that was not very attractive: doing any course whatsoever in a private university, involving a lot of sacrifice when it come to paying it, getting a slightly better job and raising a family. Entering USP represented a different prospect in life from the one that was foreseeable from his social situation. The difference that university has made in the life of Marcos is obvious when he says that before, however hard he worked and however many efforts he made, nothing seemed to happen, while in the university, with just a little effort, "the world spins". In short, entering a public university, for this student, meant the possibility of dreaming: "I don't think I would have had all these possibilities; the possibility of dreaming about a load of things, doing a post-graduate degree abroad, travelling to Europe and going on studying; goodness, for me five years ago there was no way this was feasible".

Entering the public university also allowed this young man to break down social barriers. Marcos relates an episode when he passed in the FUVEST entry exam that illustrates this:

[a] situation involving people I always served, and I went to get their order and the manager was congratulating me. One of the lads who was at the table overheard our conversation and said: "Oh! You passed! Congratulations, you passed for USP! Goodness! How great!" Then I went back to the table to take their order, and he said to the others: "Oh! Marcos passed his university entry exam in psychology!" Then one of the guys said... "Congratulations". Furthermore, he said: "For USP!" That's when the guy stood up and held out his hand: "My congratulations!" In short, it was really nice of them. At that moment, at least, it all made sense to me [...] that situation put a whole new dimension on the thing, or did as far as I was concerned, because I'm there, a waiter, and the group all had an idea of what working as a waiter was, the idea of serving. People imagine they know what it is. I used to pick this up a lot when I was working, like people who managed to break away from these and people who were unable to break away from it. People who related to you as a person and people who related to you as a service provider, as a waiter, as a kid, in French [he clicks his fingers, imitating the gesture of summoning a waiter]. Furthermore, there, at that moment in time this guy did away with all that; he placed his order, oh great and goodness me! USP breaks down barriers! To have passed for USP broke all this down; it broke it down, right away! I was the waiter serving: "Oh! Congratulations - bring me a beer. Oh! How great - a lager, no head." No! Then, all the dimensions changed, and I said: "Oh, is that so? That's the way it works, is it? Oh! How good, I'm beginning to enjoy this!" [laughs] (...) And, then the meaning of this, [...] he destroyed it all; the guy destroyed this all by what he said and his attitude: "Hmm, I passed in the university, so it makes a difference! Son of a bitch! (laughing); I'm the same guy, but now I no longer am!"

Despite recognizing the possibilities that entering free higher education provided him with, Marcos has a very critical view of public universities and of the University of São Paulo, in particular. He has an awareness of the social position this institution occupies in a society like Brazilian society and of the responsibility he has of taking advantage of and enjoying something to which few have access. He criticizes USP's super-selectivity, the elitism the course encourages and the competition in the entry exam, which he considers to be deeply "disloyal".

About school Marcos also says that for him the university represented a "first catalyst" at another moment and on another level. When asked about significant moments on his academic path to university, Marcos immediately remembers some good teachers, who were also "great human figures". He especially remembers teachers who, in addition to their

knowledge or their teaching competence, were professionals who were committed to the pupils' learning process. According to Marcos, his liking of and facility with subjects in the arts area is related to his admiration for teachers of these disciplines. However, Marcos finds it difficult to talk about the school's contribution towards constructing his path, because despite recognizing it as a catalyst, he felt "harmed" by the quality of the education that was offered him, that made it so difficult for him and delayed him realizing his dream – access to a public university.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The story of Marcus illustrates the aspects that we have tried to deal with throughout this paper: the need for investigating the part the school plays in constructing extended academic paths and for being alert to other meanings, in addition to suffering, relating to the access and permanence of poor students in higher education. If on the one hand the student's path is marked by an enormous effort, fatigue and difficulties, on the other, entry to a public university brings with it possibilities that completely transform the life of this young person. If entry to a university course, and, moreover, concluding it, even in a university with great social prestige like USP, is no guarantee of professional or social "success", the chances of this occurring in the life of a young person without access to public higher education are practically nil.

At a time when the access of students from low-income working-class segments to public higher education is the "order of the day", focusing on the possibilities that entry and permanence in the public university open up to a young poor person and thinking about how the school contributes to this may be an instrument in the struggle for extending, in a quality way, the number of places available in higher education and the beginning of a reflection on improvements in basic education that, allied to various other actions, may effectively contribute to making public higher education more accessible for these young people.

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