

ALTERNATIVE COURSES FOR COLLEGE ENTRANCE EXAMINATION AND HIGHER EDUCATION ACCESS: FROM EQUALITY TO EQUITY

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ABSTRACT

ALTERNATIVE COURSES FOR COLLEGE ENTRANCE EXAMINATION AND HIGHER EDUCATION ACCESS: FROM EQUALITY TO EQUITY. This work explores the growing demands for increasing access to higher education at a time when discussions on equality of opportunities at the level of compulsory education are shifting to higher education. Since the late 90s, free and non-profit higher education preparatory courses, representing the interests of new groups of pupils completing basic education, have been on the rise in social movements oriented toward underprivileged segments of the population. Public universities of the State of São Paulo, sensitive to the social needs of inclusion, have also taken actions favoring access and permanence of these social segments in their courses. This work analyzes the ambiguities and openings found in preparatory programs for higher education, referring to the Pro-University Student Program, which was developed by the University of São Paulo in partnership with the State Secretariat of Education, focusing on pupils from the state school system, studying at the last grade of basic education. This study provides a profile of the students, analyzing the effects of this type of initiative on young people's relations with knowledge and on the construction of their identities. It suggests that an affirmative action for inclusion of young people from popular segments of society in public institutions of higher education requires an

educational approach in which socialization and learning are closely connected. The acquisition of preparatory knowledge to take entrance examination is not seen solely for its instrumental value. In fact, it acquires other meanings such as a new way of looking at the world and of relating to the self and the other.

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION – HIGHER EDUCATION – COMMUNITY EDUCATION

Over the last years we have witnessed the expansion of college entrance examination preparatory courses targeted at specific segments of the population historically underrepresented in higher education, with the purpose of giving them increased access opportunities. Universal education policies guided by the supply rationale could not fulfill the promise of treating everyone equally, and this has produced a strong trend toward policies inspired by demand, which assume the right to difference as the basis of the right to equality. Various studies point to the risks of fragmentation and dispersion when policies focused on the excluded are the priority. Today, however, it is already recognized that, once limited their risks and maintained public responsibilities with universal policies, affirmative action policies have a significant potential to increase the range of options for building a just and democratic society, by adopting intervention strategies which benefit underprivileged social groups. Afonso (2003), by proposing elements for an agenda of investigation in the field of education policies, calls attention to the need to explore the emergence of new and more hybrid forms of investigation that articulate social regulatory and emancipatory practices.

This paper analyzes the ambiguities and opening perspectives found in affirmative action programs for public higher education access, focusing on a program developed with students completing secondary school education in public state schools of the State of São Paulo.

At the end of the 1990s and beginning of the first decade of the new millennium, the expansion of higher education was a pressing issue in the public policy agenda as a factor of social growth and development. The changes in the period created citizens' demand for higher and higher schooling levels. Difficulties in entering the labor market resulting from economic globalization and technological development processes, as well as cultural globalization further increased the pressures of young people for higher education opportunities in order to get a better place in contemporary society. The analysis made by Filmus (2002) on the condition of secondary school students in Latin America identifies a

situation distinct from that prevailing a few decades ago, in which higher schooling levels spurred the social ascent of those population segments with access to it. Today, young people are challenged to study more and more in order to maintain their social status.

On the other hand, and despite their limitations, universal policies for democratization of education led the country to recognized advances in both the access to and the application of resources in education. The transformation of the secondary school in increasingly universal final stage of basic education, and the policies to correct the flow of students on primary school, such as the organization of acceleration classes, recovery measures, the fight against dropout rates, and the adoption of learning cycle regimes, resulted in a significant increase in enrollments, especially in the State of São Paulo, which concentrates the country's highest enrollment rate.

According to the National Education Plan (PNE), in 1997, in a population of 17 million students in the 15-to-19 age group only 6 million were in secondary school, 53.8% of which with age/grade mismatch. However, historical data covering the last decade of the 20th century and the first five years of this century show a trend for significant growth in secondary school enrollments. In the State of São Paulo, the public secondary school system, which serves 85% of students in the state, managed to achieve 11% and 10% of new annual enrollments, in the years 1997 and 1998 respectively. An increase that corresponded to approximately 100,000 new annual enrollments, produced by affirmative-action policies in primary school and by the increasing importance given to education by students, their families, and by society in general.

This trend became more modest in the following years, and data published by the National Institute of Pedagogical Studies (INEP) for 2005 show reduction in the number of enrollments in São Paulo, Santa Catarina, and Rio Grande do Sul, states with records of significant secondary school enrollment rates. In the State of São Paulo, the records show a decline of about -7.2% in the public school system, and of -6.5% in all school systems.

Studies and analyses are being undertaken to identify probable factors intervening in this new situation. A fact to be considered is that the strongest decline was among students older than the group of 15-17 years, which is the regular age group for this school level. Possible hypotheses for this range from economic factors, dropping out to work, to combined factors including flow regulation policies adopted.

Anyway, an explosion in demand for higher education over the last years is now a reality and is expected to continue due to the huge pent-up demand. As compared to its neighbors in Latin America, the

enormous expansion of the college-seeking population in Brazil over the last 40 years is still below the gross schooling level rates already reached by them. According to data published by Unesco for the years 1999/2000, the number of higher education enrollments in Brazil amounted to 15% while Chile and Argentina had rates of 38% and 48%, respectively.

Another aspect to be taken into account is that the change takes place not only in education indicators, but also in the profile of those who finished secondary school, which were regarded not long ago as a small group of survivors. Such students show a highly heterogeneous profile from the point of view of socioeconomic background, cultural experiences, and usually rough school trajectories. A large number of these students come from families that have not even completed the initial years of basic education.

With the resulting increase in the number of students finishing public secondary education, now making up a larger contingent of representatives of major society strata, there was a much lively debate over the principle of equality of opportunity; this was the key element for public school expansion through the adoption of homogenizing policies, which ended up favoring restricted groups, holders of economic, social, and cultural privileges.

Entrance examination for higher education institutions date back to Brazilian colonial times. They gained the designation of college entrance examination after the 1915 Carlos Maximiliano Reform, and seemed to be intended as a tool for the formation of the country's leading elite, with their selective nature getting more and more visible over time. Even at times of increased flexibilization, the selective nature of higher education access was supported by the nature of secondary school structure itself. The secondary school was for the most part conceived as a ritual of passage which permitted only a few to survive.

As a result of this, college entrance preparatory courses were created and later expanded, following the increase in demand for higher education and the need to more qualified manpower. They are profit-oriented courses, divided by areas of specialization, and designed for the more favored population segments, what for decades has enhanced the selective nature of higher education, validated as a true expression of equal opportunity and merit policies.

Contemporary society, however, faces new challenges resulting from the changes produced in recent times and reflected in the different fields of human activity. On one hand, there is need to meet the increasing demand for a better preparation of the population from the educational point of view, so that it can be on familiar terms with technological, productive, and economic advances as well as enjoy their

collective benefits. On the other hand, and not less important, there is the ethical challenge of building a social order governed by justice and by the recognition of the basic equality of human beings in the face of the perverse effects of inequality and social exclusion.

In this context, discussion on equal opportunity and education, which was previously limited to the area of compulsory education, is now brought into the sphere of the university and demands a new review of concepts underlying the principles of individual autonomy, excellence and merit, and with social relevance as its main reference.

The World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-First Century, of 1998, reproduces article 26, §1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, saying that admission to higher education should be on the basis of merit, capacity, effort, perseverance, and determination of its candidates. Therefore, it continues to favor a policy based on individual merit, but now on the basis of a higher education vision considered component of a continuous education system, bound to the other educational levels which it must promote. It should be accessible to all in their lifetime, open to any person who satisfactorily finished secondary school or meets all the conditions necessary for admission without discrimination, be it cultural, linguistic, ethnic, or of disadvantaged groups “since these groups may have experiences and talents, be them individual or collective, which are of great value to the development of societies and nations.” A value to be considered whether from an ethical and moral point of view, relating to the respect and dignity to which every human being is entitled, or from an economic point of view, so dear to more market- and competition-oriented societies. One of the findings of 21st century societies is that people with socially and culturally differentiated experiences, and who are used to interact with environments of great diversity, develop the ability to respond to new and varied activities and challenges in a flexible manner. Living together situations of cultural, ethnic, and racial plurality is considered one of the possibilities of building more just and democratic societies. And democratic multiculturalism requires implementation of concrete measures to promote social and economic participation of disadvantaged groups.

In this aspect, studies of profiles of candidates and entrants in schools offering free higher education, especially universities and courses of higher academic and social prestige, are particularly revealing. Students’ indicators describe a situation in which the perverse effects of the equal opportunity principle are clearly noticeable. In the State of São Paulo, as already mentioned, 85% of secondary school students study in state public schools. Yet only 20% of those that passed the University Foundation for

College Entrance Examination (FUVEST) tests come from public schools. This is a fact that fuels criticism of public universities by various kinds of interest groups.

Those who want to contribute to the process of expansion and improvement of public universities in terms of access hope that they succeed in separating merit issues from traditionally maintained privileges (Santos, 2004). Steps have been taken towards this end, with the support of actors within the universities, or from other state organizations, and of citizens collectively organized.

The beginning of this century saw a lively debate over social inclusion, and persistent pressure for affirmative action-oriented public policies that ensure higher education access to so far ignored population segments. Affirmative actions, or positive discrimination actions, are policies of social integration aimed at promoting access of discriminated groups to the various sectors of economic, political, institutional, cultural, and social life. They are characterized by their temporary nature and by giving differentiated and favorable treatment with the purpose of reversing a historical pattern of discrimination and exclusion, which reproduces itself due to a complex group of factors (Jaccoud, Beghin, 2002).

In the sphere of the law, the principle of full equality is not only abstract by nature, but it is challenged today by experiences and studies showing that such principle alone cannot give socially disadvantaged individuals access to opportunities enjoyed by the socially privileged.

According to the Supreme Court Justice judge Joaquim Barbosa Gomes (2005), what really matters is: to replace equality of opportunity with equality of conditions, and to adopt a dynamic idea of equality, based on the evaluation of real, existing society disadvantages, implying that unequal situations should be treated differently to avoid increasing inequality. His idea is that the actions should follow the principles of diversity and pluralism, in order to produce a change in the collective behavior and in the collective mind, molded by tradition, by habits, and by history. Affirmative policies aim to introduce cultural, pedagogical, and psychological changes which can replace the idea in the collective imaginary of supremacy and subordination between social groups, with a project for a democratic society that guarantees cultural diversity and plurality, and promotes conditions for protagonism, citizenship, and personal dignity.

Social movements representing the interests of new groups of students completing basic education have multiplied since the late 1990s, with a dual objective: to prepare low-income segments for higher education access by organizing free, nonprofit college entrance examination preparatory courses, and by putting pressure on government agencies for affirmative actions of social inclusion regarding

opportunities to continue higher education studies. Some of these movements involve the issue of race and follow the concept of compensatory affirmative action, fighting for the reparation of social injustice, while others are of a more preventive nature and take a neutral stance on racial issues. Their idea is to stimulate higher social diversity by promoting and strengthening population segments that have been traditionally underrepresented in higher education.

A study undertaken by Bachetto (2003) in the city of São Paulo, between the years 1999 and 2000, identifies 16 alternative popular courses organized by social movements linked to a broad spectrum of NGOs, especially those with ties to students or to the black movements. Excepting one, beginning in 1987, all the other courses started their activities between 1996 and 2000, 50% of which with the collaboration of voluntary teachers. With the indirect support of neighborhood associations, universities, schools, churches, companies, and other sectors of society, these movements focused on population groups systematically excluded from a university education, particularly students coming from public schools and without money to pay for a preparatory course before entering college. At the same time, they tried to lead the student into a more critical vision of society, by conducting lessons on topics related to Human Rights and Citizenship, besides opening way for cultural activities and vocational guidance.

This picture, based on São Paulo city data, reflects the situation of other cities and towns in the country, where college entrance examination preparatory courses for the poor are commonly found, with a good number of them highlighting the racial issue, and being designed for Afro-Brazilians. Emerson dos Santos (2005) traces the origin of this movement to the Metropolitan Area of Rio de Janeiro in the 1990s. There the project College Entrance Examination Courses for Blacks and Disadvantaged People (PVNC) started, with various community courses being created with the purpose of increasing schooling in the social base of the black movement. According to the same author, these college entrance examination preparatory courses for the poor, centered on the racial issue, have been one of the main tools used to spread the the Brazilian black movement agenda, disseminating the anti-racist message, with special emphasis on the criticism of the myth of racial democracy in Brazil.

These courses depend mostly on voluntary work, with the coordination aspect being dealt with by teachers and students themselves. With regard to expenses with teaching material and help to the most disadvantaged students, they are covered by small contributions made by the pupils themselves. Emerson dos Santos believes the impressive progress of this type of movement lies in the fact that these centers are places for a fierce confrontation of visions about social issues, due to the connections of teachers with

religious, political, and union organizations of various hues. No matter to what extent these centers depend on the issue that generated the college entrance examination preparatory course movement: the racial issue, the course Citizenship and Culture, whose content includes topics of wider interest than the mere preparation for college entrance examination, is decisive as a way to confront a conservative pedagogical model considered socially excluding.

An initiative inspired by PVNC, also playing an important role in the alternative college entrance examination preparatory courses of racial nature, is the Education and Citizenship for Afro-Brazilians and Disadvantaged People (EDUCAFRO) movement, with over 10,000 students in the states of São Paulo, Minas Gerais, Rio de Janeiro, and Espírito Santo . There is also the Movement of Those with No Higher Education Access (MSU), active in ten Brazilian states. There is further evidence of countless individual and diversified initiatives. This is a topic that deserves to be better investigated.

According to Santos, the political dimension of these popular prep courses resulting from their affirmative action initiatives made them become important interlocutors in discussions with government officials of different agencies. They are considered legitimate Afro-Brazilian spokespersons who are able to propose public policies for the social advancement of this population segment.

One of the victories of the black movement was the creation by the Ministry of Education (MEC), in November 2002, of the Diversity Program at College, Law no.10.558, with the purpose of implementing and assessing strategies for higher education access and promotion of socially disadvantaged groups, with emphasis on Afro-Brazilians and indigenous peoples. The Program, still in force today, selects nonprofit public or private institutions, with one-year previous experience in the management of educational projects for access to college, and is specifically oriented toward Afro-Brazilians and indigenous peoples who finished secondary school. It offers technical and financial support for the development of Innovative Course Projects (PICs), with a workload of 900 hours, during 9 months, including class hours and activities involving social education and access to cultural goods. Each PIC proposal presented by institutions eligible for the program will be evaluated in accordance with the following mandatory technical requirements: establish academic content consistent and coherent with the National Curricular Guidelines for Secondary Education (DCNEM); develop content and activities to combat racism, study racial relations in Brazil, enhance racial and ethnic diversity; and have access to cultural goods. Linking the proposal to anti-racism is ensured by analysis of the teaching material submitted by the institution applying for the program when registering. In the year 2004, the Program

benefited approximately 3,400 students participating in 27 Innovative Course Projects and, in 2005, 5,350 students enrolled in 22 projects in different regions of Brazil.

There are also other indicators showing the Brazilian government's favorable response to pressures for affirmative actions in higher education access. In 2004, in the higher education reform document, MEC introduced a proposal for increasing the number of enrollments in college night courses and defended the application of quotas in the public system. According to MEC, federal higher education institutions should reserve at least 50% of their vacancies for public school pupils, places which would in turn be shared between blacks and indigenous peoples according to the ethnic composition of each Brazilian state. In the same year it was created the Unified for All Program (PROUNI), proclaiming an access affirmative action also based on racial and socioeconomic criteria, aimed at enabling students from public schools and scholarship holders from private schools to fill vacancies, 30% of which were reserved for Afro-Brazilians and indigenous peoples. The PROUNI offers private institutions of higher education tax exemption in exchange for these vacancies. In 2005, over 100,000 vacancies were filled by low-income students, 30,000 of them being Afro-Brazilians. In 2006, 200,000 vacancies at private institutions should be filled.

The underlying idea is that the quota system, especially with regard to more prestigious courses, will open the university to students with a profile that may lack the academic foundation needed to meet college entrance examination, but that may be positive in other aspects, such as the intimate knowledge they have of the "real country" in which lives a large part of the population. This lends social relevance to public university contributions and responsibilities.

The universities, in turn, pressed by different sectors of society to contribute to the project for a more democratic and fair society, are more attentive to the need to harbor students who better reflect the social, economic, and cultural population diversity. In May 2003, the Working Group created by the Council of São Paulo State Public University Presidents (CRUESP) to analyze the social inclusion issue, prepared a document in which, while reaffirming the commitment to academic excellence, university autonomy, and social inclusion, as well as the centrality of the merit principle to higher education access, it also acknowledged the importance of socially equitable representation of its eligible and already enrolled students, still recognizably limited to a reduced circle of citizens. The final report of this Working Group brings forward proposals for the Brazilian government and the University itself to consider. To the Brazilian government it suggests the provision of scholarships for socioeconomically disadvantaged

secondary school students to attend college entrance examination preparatory courses, and an optional fourth grade under college guidance for promising students who are interested in continuing their studies. As regards the universities themselves, the report proposes expansion of teacher on-going education projects, periodic discussions on college entrance examination with teachers from the public school system, and facilitating actions aimed at increasing democratization of higher education access and retention for economically disadvantaged students, such as waiver of college entrance examination fees, increase in the number of night course enrollments, scholarships, healthcare delivery, housing, and actions to minimize dropout due to economic reasons.

Between 1999 and 2005 the number of FUVEST waivers of college entrance examination fees rose from 5,000 to 65,000. They applied to students from public schools who submitted a statement of poverty. It is worth noting that between 1998 and 2000 42 suits were filed claiming college entrance examination fee waivers for disadvantaged students and also for those from public schools.

The fight for fee waiver, however, did not achieve the desired effect. The absence rate in the group of candidates granted fee waivers is generally high, and their admission percentage very low, 1.7% at 2001 FUVEST examination. Even with these initiatives, studies reveal that the number of low-income college students who finished secondary education in public schools is still small. The actions to reverse the current situation are still insufficient. At FUVEST 2004/2005 college entrance examination, 38% of the candidates came from public schools, but only 20% of them successfully entered college. In 2005/2006, the number of students from public schools who were admitted fell further, from 20% to 18.5%. As mentioned before in this paper, all this in a setting in which public state school accounts for 85% of total enrollments in secondary school.

Monitoring of these different strategies regarding democratization of higher education access and retention enabled a more comprehensive understanding of the situation. Over the last years, one of the ideas developed at the heart of São Paulo public universities was that the moment requires a convergence of actions much broader in scope, involving social organizations and government agencies, to face the challenge and the urgency to expand the population contingent with higher education, without forgetting the social inclusion principle, especially as regards equitable representation of all social groups.

THE UNIVERSITY OF SÃO PAULO'S PRO-UNIVERSITY PROGRAM

As a response to such demands, and to facilitate the access to public higher education, the University of São Paulo (USP) through its Office of the Dean of Undergraduate Studies, and in partnership with the State Secretariat of Education (SEE-SP), created a program of additional study hours for third-grade students from state secondary schools, to be conducted during a school semester.

The following analysis of this experience, the Pro-University Program (hereinafter called the Program), will be made by comparison with two other similar programs: the Cursinho Popular de Jandira (Popular Preparatory Course of Jandira) (CPJ), created by municipal law, and the Curso de Apoio Popular Estudantil (Popular Students' Support Course (CAPE), developed at USP-Ribeirão Preto. They are three college entrance examination preparatory courses which have in common the adoption of a neutral stance on racial issues, and connection either with initiatives by the university, such as the Program and the CAPE, or with the college experience because they recruit USP undergraduate students to teach in them. They are initiatives that transcend the strict purpose of helping students enter the university. The three courses seek to promote teaching experiences that enable students to develop a relationship with knowledge that is not merely instrumental, but one that contributes to their education in the social and cognitive levels, as active citizens who own a body of cultural and intellectual assets that will allow them to formulate projects for their personal lives with wider horizons.

The Program resulted from USP's understanding of the relevance of some variables – such as students' time dedicated to study, amplification of knowledge spaces, and contacts with key persons which favor consolidation of basic education and better capabilities to carry on studies in higher education. Research confirms the higher number of students that apply and are admitted to college after dedicating additional study hours supplementary to secondary school education. Among those who passed Fuvest test in recent years, the majority of them had attended college entrance examination preparatory courses for six months to one and a half years. But since such courses are not affordable to students from low-income families, public institutions, particularly the universities, should collaborate to increase offer a better ground to disadvantage youngsters to get into college.

The Program course was taught from July through November 2004, and included daily activities totaling 30 hours per week. Total course hours: 640. State secondary schools in the São Paulo Metropolitan Region offered courses for 5,000 students distributed in 16 groups, nine of them to attend classes during the day, and seven at night (USP, 2005).

Enrollment criteria for the Program were: enrollment in the third grade of a state secondary school; no record of failure in any of the three secondary school years; higher grades than those in a given standard established for evaluation of students' performance in the State of Sao Paulo; school performance in 2003 according to the concepts excellent, good, and regular adopted in their schools, and school attendance never below 75%. In the event of ties, students with lower family incomes should be selected. In most schools, however, the number of applications was equal to or only slightly higher than the number of places offered, meaning that such criteria were not exactly selective.

Applications in the schools involved 3,986 students, of which a little over 50% completed the Program. According to state secondary school teachers and students, among the main difficulties to achieve a higher enrollment rate were: unsatisfactory advertisement of the Program in the school system; location of Program schools, not always easily reached by public transportation; high transportation costs, and the amount of time spent to and from course venue.

During the five-month course, continual dropping out and new enrollments took place. One of the hypotheses formulated to explain this referred to the nature of the Program, which was developed to be a voluntary activity embraced by interested students. The Program's structure and operation differed, therefore, from regular education because enrollment was not mandatory, and evaluations performed during the course were only of a diagnostic nature. Due to difficulties in having all slots available filled in, four more calls for enrollment were subsequently made.

The profile of Program students was relatively homogeneous as regards to age and socioeconomic status. The average age was 17-18 because no student with records of previous failure was accepted. As to socioeconomic status, students belonged to low-income families; 62% declared a monthly family income between 500 and 1,500 reals, and 30.7% had monthly family incomes of less than 500 reals. In most cases, one person, at the most two, contributed to the family income. In 76% of cases, 4 to 6 people lived off such incomes.

A careful analysis based on a socioeconomic questionnaire answered by 1,963 Program students registered for the FUVEST entrance test revealed a majority of females (69.7%) and of white people (51.6%). The proportion of blacks (36.9% of dark-skinned people and 8.8% of blacks) was close to that found in the general population, but very distant from the representation of such ethnic groups among students enrolled in the university. Indigenous people amounted to only 0.8% of the total figure.

Of total students, 95% had no jobs, despite belonging to families with very low buying power. Attending the Program, and the third secondary school grade classes at the same time certainly contributed to fewer chances for them to find time for a paid job.

Economic difficulties of Program participants became more evident when the students were asked whether they themselves would be able to pay for their living expenses during college years. Only 9.3% believed they could count exclusively on family support; 48.8% intended to get a job and also rely on family help; and 33.3% expected to be able to get some scholarship to be supplemented by a paid job.

No significant differences between father's and mother's schooling were observed. Their level of schooling was in general low, but higher than the general population average. Around 60% of fathers and 52% of mothers had only basic education, and the majority of them had not completed it; the number of mothers with secondary school education was higher than the number of fathers (33% and 28%, respectively). Very few parents were illiterate or had a college degree.

Other student profile data were collected through a questionnaire handed out at the end of the Program and answered by 1,568 individuals. An analysis of questionnaire responses shows that the few students who had some kind of paid job worked only a couple of hours a day or on the weekends. This means, at least theoretically, that we are dealing with students who have time to study and also get involved in other social and cultural activities. However, they are young people with few opportunities for personal development in terms of cultural and recreational experiences. The most cited student activities were: meeting friends, listening to music, watching television, and helping out with household chores. Between 75 % and 94% of them rarely or never go to the movies or theater, seldom participate in musical activities or in arts or dance activities; around 50% participate in religious activities, and over the half of them rarely or never practice sports.

USP professors, experts in different areas, were in charge of course planning, production of teaching materials, as well as selection and training of undergraduate students to teach and act as peer leaders in the Program course. State school system professionals, teachers, pedagogical coordinators, and vice principals participated in the local coordination of Program activities.

Curriculum materials specially produced for the Program featured basic contents to reinforce and consolidate learning. The selection test program, advertised by FUVEST, remained as reference for the studies, once the concern was to expand the possibilities of social inclusion without putting the merit principle and academic excellence at risk.

Despite this characteristic that could make the Program comparable with existing preparatory courses, particularly the paid ones, this course assumed particular features that made it different from regular college entrance examination preparatory courses. Instead of training students on given subjects or on most frequent questions in college entrance examination only, the purpose of the Program was strengthening overall education of students. And this was due to two reasons: one of a practical nature and another of a conceptual, theoretical nature. From a practical standpoint, the dominant position among those who conceived the Program was that intensive preparation during less than six months over a non-consolidated knowledge base would not yield good results. One needed to ensure overall education of students. From a conceptual standpoint, the prevailing idea was developing the Program according to educational and pedagogical parameters which could provide not only more solid basic education, but also the potential for advances and innovations in secondary school curricula and pedagogical practices. The underlying intention was establishing more integration between basic education and higher education, in order to improve the quality of teaching at all levels.

In some cases, Program planners included contents such as geometry in Mathematics, which they considered relevant, but were not generally included at this level of education; or new approaches to knowledge were adopted which favored production of meaning and articulation with life experiences of students. In short, one was dealing with curricular material that was selected not only to prepare students for college entrance examination, but to provide activities that could establish a more meaningful and challenging relationship with knowledge and overall education. As already mentioned, the idea was not covering the full entrance examination programs of public universities. This was a subject around which temporary consensus was reached in the course of

the experience. Anyway, students and teachers, trainees/undergraduates were guided and committed to success in the entrance examination, but also aware of the importance of consolidating basic education.

Continual evaluations and simulated evaluations undertaken in the course of the Program revealed low performance rates and common difficulties among the various courses: absence of basic knowledge, lack of attention when reading questions, difficulties in interpretation of propositions, poor argumentation skills. Most of the contents of the teaching support materials which should be used to review contents and consolidate knowledge previously acquired were unknown to most students, thus requiring more time to be worked in class than expected. In this sense, full development of the support material – which was in fact a special extract from official entrance examination programs – was not feasible. Therefore, it is not surprising that a questionnaire answered during the Program revealed that only 12% of students considered themselves prepared for the college entrance examination, while 65 % said they were only partially prepared.

Among the 1,963 Program students who took the FUVEST test, 73% admitted that the five-month course was their only opportunity for supplementary studies for the entrance examination. This reduced time for extra learning was in fact no advantage for Program students when compared to private school students or students who passed FUVEST tests. Among the latter, 60% attended preparatory courses for over six months to one and half years.

Such findings and pass-fail statistics from São Paulo state universities reinforce the hypothesis that longer learning times are a significant variable for the success of students who want to enter college. Data collected from the three state universities (University of São Paulo (USP), University of Campinas (UNICAMP), and São Paulo State University (UNESP) showed that 44 out of 2,494 students attending the Program course by its end passed the entrance examination. Students that passed the examination and attended good part of the Program, but failed to attend classes in the last two weeks, were not computed.

In order to better qualify the 1.77% rate of Program students who passed the college entrance examination, it is necessary to analyze both the profile of these students and of those who passed FUVEST, particularly those who passed the USP Leste college entrance examination. USP Leste is a new USP campus located in the São Paulo City Eastern section, a region concentrating a very

large low-income population segment. The new campus represents a social inclusion initiative. The USP Leste campus is a response to the demand for more opportunities for higher education. Its purpose is to contribute to the overall and educational development of the São Paulo City Eastern section by applying its proposal to local needs, and by offering innovative courses which generally have not attracted many USP entrance examination candidates yet. In 2005, of all candidates to take FUVEST exams, 40 % were Eastern section residents. So were 28% of those who passed the exam and entered college. An analysis of the profile of all students who passed FUVEST, and of those admitted to USP Leste, and of Program students who passed FUVEST, shows that the latter is the most representative of the population in terms of ethnic origin and family income.

While the admission rate of blacks through FUVEST was in general 10%, and 21% at USP Leste, this rate reached 30% among Program participants.

Even more significant are data referring to family income. While FUVEST (23%) and USP Leste (40%) students admitted to college belonged to families with incomes of less than 1,500 reais per month, among Program students this percentage reached 92%. Considering questionnaire data revealing that these students belong to more than four-member families, and in some cases to six-member families, it is possible to state that they belong to the most indigent population strata.

COMPARING PROGRAMS WITH SIMILAR PURPOSES

Comparing the experience of the Program with other popular courses to prepare students for college entrance examination, developed in the town of Jandira and the city of Ribeirão Preto, in the State of São Paulo, one can perceive significant similarities and differences which can offer suggestions for cultural and schooling policies for young students and those who have just finished secondary school.

The Popular Preparatory Course of Jandira (CPJ) is an initiative of the Jandira Students Association (UEJ) with the support of the Movement of those with no Higher Education Access (MSU) and other leaderships in the municipality. The proposed bill was sent to Town Council and passed there in 2002. A municipal law instituted the course and established an agreement involving UEJ, the local government, and other spheres of government, and partnerships with domestic and international civil society organizations. The main CPJ supporter is the Jandira municipal

government, but partnerships were sealed to hire trainees and purchase teaching materials. Since 2005, CPJ benefits from MEC support for the development of their Pedagogical Project, scholarship grants for students, and purchase of equipment. In 2003, CPJ had 780 students (Ruedas, 2005).

CAPE was an idea of a group of students, former students, professors, and employees from USP-Ribeirão Preto in the early 1990s. They were planning to create a center for promotion of adult literacy, but after a survey of community demands they found the emerging need for preparing low-income students for higher education access (Bonfim, 2003). With the support of a neighborhood association the first class of 30 students was inaugurated in 1991. In 1997, the City Council granted CAPE the status of nonprofit organization and, between 1999 and 2002, the course was taught in campus facilities. In 2003 they inaugurated their own facilities, whose rent is paid with the help of companies and individuals. Professors, undergraduate and graduate students, and collaborators who identified with the cause do voluntary work. In 2002 CAPE served 170 students.

Although there are differences in schooling status of the students served, at CPJ and CAPE courses are offered to older people who finished secondary school, most of them involved with jobs, 42% at CPJ and 68% at CAPE. In the three programs, female students are the majority, even at CAPE where most students (60%) work, and the presence of Afro-Brazilians is similar to that found in the Brazilian population, 40% of total CPJ students.

Due to the socioeconomic selection criteria, similarly to Program students CAPE or CPJ youths come from low-income families. In 2004, 40% of CPJ students came from four-member to six-member families with incomes from one to three minimum monthly wages. At CAPE, after students are rated for their secondary school level knowledge, a strict socioeconomic selection is undertaken through documented data and visits to the families to ascertain the motivation of applicants and the socioeconomic conditions of families.

The approximate dropout rate of 50% in the three programs suggests reasons connected to time spent looking for a job, difficulties in reconciling course and work hours, and even physical fitness, and difficulties to follow the course. Bonfim's observation (2003) about the high dropout rates among CAPE students living in poor conditions very close to the poverty line seems pertinent: "any unexpected event causes disruption and makes it impossible for them to attend classes: disease and/or death in the family, job loss, separation, lack of financial resources to

ensure transportation.” They also have limited access to cultural goods, such as books, theater, movies, computer, and supplementary foreign language and computer courses.

The three programs are free, the contribution of 11% of a minimum monthly wage at CAPE is voluntary, and teaching materials are donated. Nevertheless, transportation and meal costs are significant for these low-income students.

CPJ’s curricular proposal replicates the conventional secondary school curriculum – called the conservative part of it – and is developed during the first five weekdays. The so-called innovative part of the curriculum includes a course, Citizenship, with one class every Saturday. It involves local organizations, development of projects to deal with present day’s subjects and topics, as well as social intervention projects of great impact on the local community. Teaching materials were produced by UNICAMP students and professors.

The CAPE curriculum includes Philosophy classes on Saturdays to discuss subjects related to politics, economy, and environmental issues. Their purpose is improving students’ awareness and analytical capacity. The course has no teaching materials of their own, and teachers use books, xerox copies, notes on the blackboard, and slides to conduct classes. The Ribeirão Preto campus management donates a monthly share of 4,000 xerox copies that are used according to teachers’ needs.

In the Program, the political-cultural education of students was contemplated in the proposal to contextualize contents of courses formulated by specialized professors. Moreover, peer leaders/undergraduates organized cultural activities on Sundays and holidays to broaden horizons and increase the understanding of social reality. A visit to the USP campus had a significant impact on students’ motivations.

The regime of shared management adopted by CPJ and CAPE differed from the Program’s, with its short, five-month duration. Both in CPJ and CAPE, the management process was built over the years of experience, aiming at democratic management with the participation of teachers/undergraduates, students, employees, and even former students and community members. An experience so far unknown and valued by the majority of students.

Data on college admission rates of students who attended these community courses reveal different situations to be better investigated. CAPE students’ college admission rates, which between 1992 and 1999 would have reached 28.4%, including both public and private colleges,

cannot be confirmed today because there is no current systematization of such data. Anyway, according to observations by the people involved, what one sees is an increase in the number of candidates and a corresponding decline in the number of students who pass the college entrance examination.

For CPJ students, although the college admission rate in 2003 and 2004 reached 6% with respect to higher education institutions in general, in public universities this admission rate was only 0,6%, a third of that achieved by Program students. At CPJ, low performance of students in college entrance examination in previous years led to the decision to foster overall education through citizenship awareness classes, social and cultural projects, text interpretation classes, and English classes aiming at raising students' self-esteem, and developing protagonism as a means of improving abilities and life skills, and not only the capacity to pass a college entrance examination.

BEYOND ENTRANCE EXAMINATION RESULTS

An analysis of the success of the programs, however, requires that we study other aspects that are not strictly related to the number of students admitted to São Paulo public universities. Concerning the Program, we examined its influence on the academic and social education of peer leader trainees, in the public schools that housed it, and particularly in school and personal life of young participants. Impressions of changes resulting from participation in the CPJ and CAPE programs were also collected. The analysis here is based on opinions of the actors involved and on the following theoretical reflections.

The small number of Program students admitted to public universities in the State of São Paulo, and the fact that they had not applied for admission to careers of higher social prestige, have led some authors to conclude that affirmative actions in education oriented to students' cognitive and social improvement do not reduce school selectivity. This would be directly connected to the social and economic selectivity existing in the country, so that positive discrimination actions are not sufficient to ensure success in the entrance examination of the more prestigious higher education institutions.

Data obtained by Borges and Carnielli (2005) on the Graded Evaluation Program (PAS) adopted by the University of Brasília suggest that social selectivity persists even when more

integration between basic and higher education is produced, and innovative forms of selection are introduced. The majority of students who were admitted to more prestigious college programs not only attended preparatory courses of longer duration – from one to one and half years – but also had expensive supplementary education, such as computer and foreign language courses, besides access to other cultural goods.

However, a more accurate review of the programs reveals important aspects of such experiences of affirmative action that may contribute to increase the potential for success of students from low-income families.

Tedesco (2004) reviewed the most suitable political strategies to help break away from social and cultural determinism in the results of learning experiences, and suggests “subjectivity policies” among other options for the pedagogical dimension. He advocates, like Cury (2005) and other scholars, the primacy of universal public policies that ensure equal opportunity in education for all as a basis for citizenship and mastering of codes of access to the world, a primary condition for the formulation of demands, personal development, and emancipation. Both scholars recognize, however, that despite the more favorable conditions for the educational process in terms of legislation, investment and coverage, inequalities persist and continue to be associated with students’ social background.

Studies on the effectiveness of schooling – notwithstanding conditioning factors of a macrostructural order – indicate the importance of factors such as time dedicated to learning, availability of supporting educational material to encourage students to improve their relationship with knowledge, teachers’ mastering of contents to be taught, diversified teaching practices, and cultural activities. At variable degrees, such elements were present in the affirmative action programs herein reviewed.

However, another hypothesis is considered critical for the analysis and formulation of pedagogical intervention strategies to promote universal, nonselective education for all. It deals with the relevance of the subjective dimension of actors involved in the educational process. In that respect, Tedesco (2004) argues that although this line of investigation involves the risk of interpreting educational inequalities under a personal perspective rather than a socioeconomic and structural one, thus reducing governmental responsibilities, it calls attention to other equally

significant factors for overall education which should be addressed, particularly those related to education of poor and socially excluded population groups.

Among the aspects of a subjectivity policy, Tedesco highlights the capacity to formulate a project for the future, and the confidence of significant adults on the individual's capacity. The institutional support of the school to the development of willingness and capacity to build a personal life project, in the perspective of a project for society, can be considered a central aspect in the student's education. The absence of projects can be one of the most significant factors characterizing poverty, due to social and economic changes that contribute to growing uncertainty about the future in today's world.

According to Program peer leaders/undergraduates, at initial phase of the Program, students positions oscillated between an absence of projects for the future and the formulation of unreal projects and between the feeling that nothing is possible and the affirmation of magical thoughts which were more related to wishful thinking than to personal effort. They also had the idea that only attending classes would be enough for them to acquire the necessary knowledge to compete in selection tests. Dubet and Martuccelli (1998) also perceived such a characteristic when they conducted studies on sociology of experience. According to these authors, the school should be responsible for strengthening the foundation for the building of a personal identity, which can be multi-referenced, but also capable of setting goals and establishing ways to achieve them.

Recent studies on the value of confidence in the capacity of students reveal the importance that the representations of themselves and of teachers have on young people's options and behaviors. These studies indicate that the cognitive dimension of the educational process must be integrated to the affective one and to cultural openness, if one wants to eliminate social stigmas and stereotypes, contributing to educational and socio-political empowerment of students. Several of these aspects were present in the programs for secondary school students.

Public school teachers involved in the Pro-University Program who were invited to give their impressions on the course highlighted the impact of the Program on students' representations of themselves, their studies and the possibilities to enter a public university. Testimonies cite the absence of perspectives that students experience after finishing basic education, when they have no hope for getting jobs or continuing their studies, and no prospects for cultural education due to the

absence of facilities for cultural activities. Testimonies addressing the broadening of new horizons, and the high level of aspiration of these young students, are revealing:

For the first time public school students have not felt excluded after finishing the third secondary school grade. For the first time they felt valued and encouraged to fight for a goal: to enter a public university , to fight for a free-of-charge education.

It was rewarding to perceive that students who were used to a simple life started to nurture expectations for better living conditions.

They discovered the possibility to grow, to get to know themselves, to find out their potential. We found dull people and let them become dreamers, people that set goals and are very much encouraged for life.

The Program developed in students skills become masters of their own destinies, of their education, thus fulfilling the purposes of their secondary education.

In the case of the Program, indications of its impact on the student's personal and school lives are also present in their representations. They refer to the Program as an opportunity they had to rewrite their biographies, including the perspective of continuing their education, with a focus on efforts to enter a public university. Although they believed the Program was not sufficient to prepare them for a college entrance examination, they never felt frustrated. On the contrary, they felt encouraged to pursue their objectives. Approximately 97% of students intended to take college entrance examination again in the coming years, in case they failed in their first attempt to pass the examination. All CAPE and CPJ students intended to do everything possible to carry on supporting activities: studying more at home, applying for scholarships, reconciling jobs and studies.

The Program made the students see a new horizon, which was built by experiencing new forms of relationship with knowledge, so far unknown to them, and by mediation of interpersonal relationships with their young teachers. Students and peer leaders alike reveal that content curricular direction contributed to enhanced meaning due to the degree of contextualization and expansion of the horizons in terms of analysis of contemporary social and natural phenomena. As students increased their interest in and mastering of subjects they had previously considered unattractive or difficult, they improved their self-confidence, and gradually overcame the myth that public school students' destiny would not include studying at a public university.

A good part of peer leaders – young adults who were still students but already owners of so much knowledge that become examples of social and educational success, - was former public school students who were positively aware of their potential for access to higher education. Their contact with low income pupils reinforced identification ties and encouraged the attainment of new goals.

In the three programs, these peer leaders – students of a prestigious public university – were regarded as close acquaintances, as friends, but above all, as people full of initiative that provided them with new tools to interpret social issues, to discover a world of culture so far unknown, and to have a promising vision of their potentials and possibilities. In the following testimonies it is possible to identify the Program as a powerful reference in the lives of people.

[The course] contributed a lot to the improvement of my learning skills and expectations, it helped me overcome my fears and gave me confidence and courage to face what life has in store for us.

I never thought that in a few months I would learn so many things that were not taught in secondary school ...

I had not attended any preparatory course before and I'm enjoying this one a lot.

The course made me learn many things, new social and political experiences, and also made me have confidence in myself again and in my capacity to fulfill my dreams and goals.

Even if we don't manage to pass a college entrance examination, we learned above all the lesson that one should never give up and always feel capable.

Testimonies of students from the other two programs have similar contents. The mastering of subject contents was accompanied by personal changes including valuation of opportunities, pursuit of goals, love of life and of people, higher self-esteem, and acquisition of persistence and self-confidence.

They saw teachers/peer leaders as people who cared and were interested in their learning process. The same type of representation was identified in the works of Abramovay (2003) and Souza (2003) on secondary school students. For them, the major virtue of a teacher is his/her interest in students' learning, and the major virtue of a school is its dedication to students' education rather than to issues related to its own operations. These are certainly characteristics of the programs analyzed in this paper.

The work developed at schools has currently required permanent justification that demands from teachers a set of attributes of wider scope than the simple mastering of knowledge and technical expertise, that is, the capacity to help students build meaning to the school experience. In case of the three programs studied in this paper, peer leaders built constant justification for the activities carried out, having in mind a project for the future which included the continuity of studies at a higher level. A candid example of this assertive attitude towards students' future was their concern about always providing them with information about higher education institutions, jobs, scholarship grants, and other opportunities for students in secondary school or out of school after completion of secondary school education. A task which has not been fully undertaken by regular secondary school education, that is, the responsibility to prepare students for the challenges of a future which is quite near, creating by the absence of information, guidance and support conditions for reproducing an underserved youth, individually accountable for their own destiny. Students who started the programs analyzed in this paper were totally uninformed about selection examinations, courses, careers, institutions, issues of importance to their options and resulting actions.

Another favorable impact of the Pro-University Program on the education of participating students was the cultural opening. Under the guidance of the peer leaders, students visited cultural venues and participated in events, entered the world of literature and learned to like reading, went to the movies and the theater, discussed movies and performed field work, and awoke to the need to take a closer look at existing opportunities. Access to free social facilities with peer leaders contributed to richer cultural experiences, which were generally restricted to free of cost activities. The high percentage of these students who do not practice sports suggests the lack of facilities for free-of-charge recreation, and the absence of an investment policy for this important aspect of education.

SOME FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Data seem to indicate that an affirmative action for the admission of youths from low-income segments into higher education institutions requires an educational proposal in which socialization and learning are closely connected. The curriculum treatment, rich in significant

social and personal references must be able to elicit a relationship with knowledge not for the sake of its instrumental value only, but fundamentally for the potential for building one's own identity, a way to see the world, of relating with oneself and with others. In their testimonies, students talk about what they have learned, and also about the importance of the experience for the building of their subjectivity not as separate things. They express with joy the fact that they understood contents they could not understand before, and learned to appreciate subjects they used to dislike. The mastering of knowledge, in this case knowledge for the college entrance examination, gives these students the sense of personal empowerment that is indispensable for the exercise of active citizenship, and the development of a strong leading role in life.

Also the contact with significant people, in a relationship characterized by commitment, openness and reciprocity, contributes to the building of a self-representation more oriented to possibilities than to limitations. In the programs in question, data suggest that some aspects of the barrier that could prevent students from craving for access to public higher education started to be broken.

The analysis of affirmative action programs in this paper, although preliminary, suggests questions for in-depth studies and investigations, and offers suggestions for more articulation between public universities, public schools, and government agencies for the formulation of cultural policies for young people, and schooling policies for secondary education with a more favorable potential for democratization of access to higher education.

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