

A HIDDEN QUASI-MARKET: DISPUTING PLACES IN “COMMON” PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN RIO DE JANEIRO, BRAZIL

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ABSTRACT

The article focuses on a phenomenon that is scarcely studied in the Brazilian context: the dispute for places in public schools that can not be characterized as elite or excellence centres, but that attained a good reputation as high-quality schools. By resorting to the concept of quasi-market, it analyses the results of a case study in six high- and low-prestige public schools in the city of Rio de Janeiro, which evidences the phenomenon in its perverse effects as to social selectivity, showing that the school administrative staff has an active role in the choice of their students. The article pleads for a more equitable process of school choice by discussing some consequences from the refusal to admit the existence of a quasi-market in Brazilian public school networks.

PUBLIC SCHOOLS – EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES – PUBLIC POLICIES – TEACHING QUALITY

It may be said that an impressive educational quasi-market, such as defined by the original economics literature, has appeared in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil after the educational reforms of the last two decades of the 20th Century. However, this quasi-market is somehow atypical in as much as its mechanisms are scarcely visible or even hidden. Considering the issue's current-time relevance, this article begins by discussing those reforms and the reactions they provoked. It then examines the use of the concept of quasi-market to discuss a highly

inequitable trait of public school systems in Brazil, and presents the results of a case study in the city of Rio de Janeiro that evidences the phenomenon in its perverse effects as to social selectivity. It ends by discussing some consequences from the refusal to admit the existence of a quasi-market in Brazilian public school networks.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND EDUCATIONAL ASSESSMENT IN BRAZIL

At the end of 2007, Brazilian government issued the Plan for Developing Education (*Plano de Desenvolvimento da Educação – PDE*), which sets targets and goals up to 2022. Among its various measures, it introduced the rather timid notion of what might be called schools' and systems' accountability for educational results. The measure chosen for assessing target attainment is the Ideb, Development of Basic Education Index (*Índice de Desenvolvimento da Educação Básica*), created a few years earlier, which is made up of indicators of performance in Portuguese and Mathematics (assessed by means of national-range *Prova Brasil*) and an indicator of student flow along primary and secondary school, which may be applied to schools individually and to school systems. Within the strict angle of available measures, Ideb allows for comparing schools or systems, thus pointing out those most requiring support for improvement. Initially, the Ministry for Education pinpointed a thousand or so municipalities with the lowest Ideb, creating special policies to address them. The index warns about grave situations in public education networks performance, being used to define targets concerning the whole system; it does not support policies aiming at raising quality by means of competitive mechanisms.

Ideb may be considered a result of a set of initiatives of national assessments set up from the 1990s. Such initiatives have been much criticised, though resistance has recently weakened and changed focus. In general, arguments against national, centralised exams lie on their supposedly liberal inspiration; they are viewed as an instrument for social hierarchization, freezing advantages and handicaps, privatising public education systems, or concealing the social injustice in school opportunity distribution¹. Centralised assessment is taken as a means to encourage the consolidation of a market or, more appropriately, according to the British case terminology, a quasi-market.

¹ A recent picture of these arguments has been drawn by Sousa & Oliveira (2003). There is also opposition to national exams in the specific pedagogical field, but these are mostly due to lacking in knowledge on such tests.

Large-scale assessments have flourished parallel to policies aiming at solving chronic problems in educational systems by encouraging competition, by resorting to the exam results as a stimulus to competition between schools and “consumers”. But national assessment systems have not served only this, being an instrument to inform public policies, thus outmatching the belief in market self-regulating mechanisms.

Ideb launching has driven relatively small attention, both from public opinion and scholars, but there were negative reactions, suggesting that it might be a strategy to produce rankings, thus favouring the onset of a competitive dynamics (Leher, 2007; CNTE, 2007). The same happened when high-school national exams Enem (*Exame Nacional do Ensino Médio*) were announced. Its results were usually showed by the media as rankings of the worst and the best schools, or in comparisons between public and private schools. The latter dispute in the market by resorting to their scores in such rankings. Some public schools have also developed self-strengthening strategies. There is an evident, competitive school market – but only for sa few sectors of society who are able to, or inclined to, invest financial and other resources in their children education.

QUASI-MARKET AS AN ANALYTICAL RESOURCE

A fierce competition for places in some public institutions is well known. They are a few schools, neatly distinct from the vast majority of “common” public schools, usually linked to the federal government or to public universities, with exceptional learning conditions. Among these, or among private schools, one may speak of market and of school choice.

Here, however, we deal with a less visible phenomenon, but that entails similar mobilisation: a dispute for places in public schools that don’t show up in the media, are not usually top-rankings, and are not otherwise publicised but in the strict scope of the public they attend to; there is strong competition among students do be admitted to them, and schools, too, seem to dispute students, though to a lesser degree. Such schools, in Rio de Janeiro, belong to either city or State public school networks², and may differ from one

² In 2006, in the State of Rio de Janeiro, enrolment in basic education in public school (city and State) systems was well over 80% of total enrollment.

another, though sometimes they might be located a few blocks away, in the same neighbourhood.

A recent study by the Ministry of Education (Brasil, 2007) has attempted to identify “effective” public schools from among those whose results at 2005 Prova Brasil were higher than national average at the 4th and 8th grades³. These schools, located at different regions and States, were submitted to a rapid assessment in search of factors that could be linked to such better performance. By indicating contrasts between schools in terms of educational dynamics, the study is very interesting for those who study ‘school-effect’, but it strikes us that no mention was made on other effects that might have been produced by students’ socio-economic status and by a possible process of social selection (at admittance and permanence) operating at school level.

In the present exploratory case study we searched for specific features of public “common” schools in the city of Rio de Janeiro that are considered “very good” both by the educational administration and by the population in general. Six schools were chosen in three regions of the city, paired according to each being seen as very good or having the opposite image. As the issue of school selectivity grew in importance during field work, we paid more attention to what is here called a hidden quasi-market.

Before beginning field work, at the end of the 2005 school year, our team was amazed by the systematic refusal, by educational administration offices, to supply data on families’ demands for places at the 4th-to-5th grade transition⁴. What was refused was a simple demand: parents’ lists of schools they preferred to send their children to. Faced with this hindrance, we proceeded to rely – not without some apprehension – on off the record information, supplied by educational staff, on which schools were most (and less), sought for by parents at that neighbourhood, which had a very good (or very bad) reputation. Aware beforehand of differences between public schools, we ended up by using such information to select the schools for the case study. Besides the certainty that this was an issue of school selectivity, we suspected that hidden processes were operating, probably concealing mechanisms of social selection.

³ There is a recent change in these (5th and 9th grades), as the length of basic compulsory schooling was extended from 8 to 9 years.

⁴ Again this has changed to 5th-to-6th grade. In many countries this is the transition from primary to secondary education, where the curriculum is diversified and teachers are subject specialists. In Brazil at this point students are often transferred from their “primary” schools.

Ever since the 1940s, public education in Brazil has been inspired by universalistic principles. Hence selective processes that are not based in universal principles– such as the performance in tests – tend not to be publicly assumed. In the presence of limited offer of good schools to which there is competition, not to employ assessments of universalistic nature may lead to inequitable selection modes, based on candidates’ assets of social relations. Apparently, that is occurring in the studied case.

In search for conceptual elements to help understand our study object, we found quite a few studies on the so-called educational quasi-market. It is grounded on the assumption that competition between educational agents may lead to a solution for public school systems inefficiency, as became evident in Britain, after the Education Reform Act of 1988.

What seems to be the core of the education quasi-market is the notion of school choice. According to literature, the quasi-market operates on the basis of parents’ having a choice of schools where to enrol their children which, by the demand side (students/clients), would provoke reactions by the supply side (schools). The latter, no longer bound by the protections typical of the welfare state, would have to adjust themselves, seeking to capture students by the quality of the services supplied: education, credentials. Following the results delivered by centralised external assessment systems, the supply side would tend to improve its quality in order to gather more clients⁵. This is the notion of a self-organised quasi-market, which significantly differs from the typical market. Le Grand (1991, p.1259) sums up the reasons for adding “quasi” to the classical market concept:

They are 'markets' because they replace monopolistic state providers with competitive independent ones. They are 'quasi' because they differ from conventional markets in a number of key ways [...] On the supply side, as with conventional markets, there is competition between productive enterprises or service suppliers. [...] However, in contrast to conventional markets, these organizations are not necessarily out to maximize their profits; nor are they necessarily privately owned. [...] On the demand side, consumer purchasing power is not expressed in money terms. Instead it takes the form of an earmarked budget or 'voucher' confined to the purchase of a specific service. (Le Grand, 1991, p. 1259)

We do not intend to discuss advantages or disadvantages of installing quasi-market

⁵ In the British quasi-market, parents can rely on the publication of the School Performance Tables, which might convey clear signs of schools quality (Bradley et al., 2000).

educational policies, but to examine criticism addressing it. The most common refers to mechanisms operating on the supply side. In the British case, greater parental choice and the transfer of control over resources and admission policies from local education authorities to schools led these to adopt procedures in order to assure a more favourable student inflow, refusing students who were “hard to teach” (West, 2006; West & Pannell, 2002). Glennerster (1991) points out that schools’ trend to select is strong, which counters the idea of quasi-market as panacea for public school systems evils, by the effect of widening inequality, by social segregation of pupils between schools.

Similar criticism as to the effects of school selection mechanisms was addressed to USA education reforms (Astin, 1992). But, there, critics have also pointed out school choice mechanisms, i.e., from the demand side. According to Bell (2005, 2006) although parents of different social classes use similar ways to choose their children’s school, the set of schools they consider and the probability that they choose a high-performance school are different. This is partly explainable by the fact that, since parents had access to different social networks, they were put into contact with a different range of schools.

From another standpoint, in Britain, policies that encourage school choice were found to favour a reduction in social segregation in schools. Gorard & Fitz (2000) and Taylor & Gorard (2001) developed indicators of internal social differentiation within schools and found, in most districts, higher intraschool social heterogeneity, which implies lesser differences between schools. They stress the role of geographical factors of which the effect could be seen in 1998, when quasi-market policies were revoked and schools catchment areas were reduced – and social differentiation between schools increased.

Van Zanten (2005) reviews various quasi-market situations in Europe and stresses competition on the supply side, showing some mechanisms that school bureaucrats resort to, in order to attract students. It seems that a good reputation is the school’s best enticement. According to the author (2005, p.569), such reputation is build on the students’ profile: In the absence of precise information on teaching quality – or of mistrust toward supposedly objective instruments shown by educational administration or by schools, in the case of British ‘ranked’ schools – what really displays a school’s quality is its students economic, cultural, and social capital.

The author reports informal, irregular, or even illegal procedures and mechanisms which are contrary to equity principles, so cherished by liberalism. Some of these would be hidden: “In public, schools must abide by strict rules for enrolment, but insistent demands from high and middle-class parents may lead more sought-for schools to infringe these rules, both legally

and illegally” (Van Zanten, 2005, p.576). Nevertheless, competition between schools must be contextualised. According to the author, in countries where free choice prevails as a value, less constrained by equity values, such as Belgium, for instance, the quasi-market operates openly; but in countries like France it assumes less visible forms, as its shifting to the inside of schools, in class organisation⁶.

Van Zanten’s study in five countries brings important implications for the Brazilian case. However, unlike the European context, in Brazil – or, more precisely, in Rio de Janeiro – there doesn’t seem to be a noticeable pressure from higher class sectors in public school quasi-market. In the country, where public schools have noticeably deteriorated, we assume that the lesser variability of public school students’ SES does not correspond to a lesser variability of schools’ quality and market position. In “common” public schools, there is rather competition among students for a quite limited supply of schools with good reputation. With less autonomy, and since there are not many high-standard schools, competition between schools is limited. Most relevant, in Rio, where few enticement strategies are available or needed by schools, it is a sound reputation that counts. Furthermore, in Brazil most schools operate in two or three shifts – morning, afternoon, and sometimes evening. A common ability grouping practice is to concentrate “best” students in the morning, leaving the others to late shifts, where they receive less attention and resources. So students also compete for shift places within the same school⁷.

In Brazil, until recently, there were practically no policies for fostering school accountability. However, there are signs of hierarchical school – public and private – classification available to parents, who use them when seeking schools for their children. Such signs are usually not as neat as in regulated quasi-markets. Furthermore, competitors for school places have unequal access to hints to such signals, according to their social capital. If, according to Bell (2005, 2006), in the presence of clear signs to inform school choice parents with access to different social networks aimed at a different range of schools, we may

⁶ In France, according to Van Zanten, in spite of its being prohibited or not recommended, the practice of ability grouping is widespread, over the heads of educational authorities. In other countries, like Hungary, it is officially instituted.

⁷ A post-graduate member of this study team, who attended “common” public schools in Rio, reports that, when enrolling into an evening shift State high school, was very soon aware that, lest she moved on to the morning shift, she wouldn’t be taught the minimum curriculum that might allow her a chance to enter a university.

suppose that, in our case, in the absence of such signs, differences between opportunities to choose may be sharper.

Such hierarchical classification of schools produces effects like the dispute for market positions (Max Weber, 1992) and mobilise even low-status, low-power, and low-income sectors (Elias & Scotson, 2000).

Schools, in turn, or rather education administration staff at intermediate levels, do not only react to demand, but take an active part in modelling supply and limiting the possibility of choice. In hidden quasi-markets such selection procedures are less visible than in regular quasi-markets. In hidden quasi-markets there are no formal, explicit, mechanisms for students admission into one particular school; mechanisms used are veiled, since, from the formal point of view, there are places for all (in Brazil, at least in compulsory schooling from 5 to 14-15 years old). In Brazil, in most State- and City-run education systems, there is no legal way (such as tests or exams) by which students might be selected or excluded. Nevertheless, in Rio there is strong –but veiled – selectivity by certain schools which, due to some degree of school autonomy, resort to artifices such as “hiding places”, or rejecting candidates.

The resulting hierarchy is based on rather fluid criteria, neatly associated to selection by social origin and contact networks. Such networks seem to include both officials at the education administration staff as politicians involved in public administration, who might benefit from the discretionary power of distributing high social value places.

Yair (1996) analysed similar mechanisms used in a large city in Israel, where there are no school choice policies. He proposes the idea of “market ecology” to understand student transit among schools. The market of places in schools, or positions, can’t be analysed in terms of isolated positions and individuals, according to their particular features. He explains choice as the combined result of student mobility in terms of vacant positions (timing and volume) and student body composition, on the one hand, and the ecology of the market, on the other, where the aggregate results of choices would interfere as a structural element in the range of possible choices. In such integrated system, one type of school allows for the existence of another; for instance, schools that select students depend on other schools that may receive the students the former have rejected. So, while students compete for schools, schools not only dispute them, but collaborate in distributing students. The competition – or

division of labour – between schools would be headed by the high-prestige ones, limiting choice by the others – which might even be left with no choice⁸.

Davies & Quirke (2007) also found traits, in Toronto, Canada, of a quasi-market not induced by official policies or by standardised exams, where segmentation resulted from the interplay between school demand and supply. Diogo (2008) in turn observed in Açores much segmentation in a restricted universe of schools, all public, not exposed to policies that might encourage disputing students.

Practically all authors who analyse school choice and education quasi-markets underline negative effects of school choice, ultimately disruption of national sociability as, in some cases (one of which might be post-socialism Eastern Europe), the combination of school choice with broad school autonomy has led to curriculum extreme diversity and to public financing of sub-national, political, or religious schooling (Heyneman, 1997).

Results of a case study

This section presents data from a survey made in six City-funded schools in Rio de Janeiro in the second semester of 2006 with nearly 3,000 5th-to-8th graders. Students answered a questionnaire on nearly 200 items grouped in 55 questions dealing with: previous schooling; general demographic features and family composition; day-to-day practices; perceptions and expectations, reasons for choosing the current school; social environment; and aspects of current school life, including exams, relationships with the various sectors, feelings, sense of belonging (Berends, 1995).

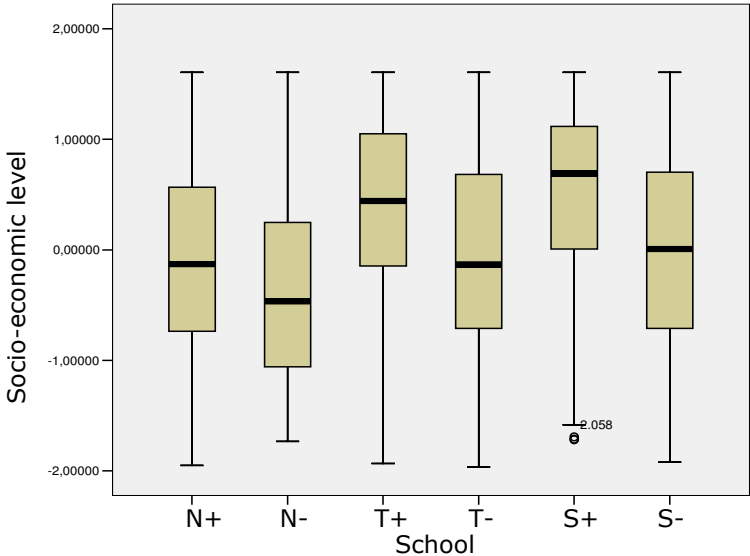
The six chosen public schools are located in three regions of the city – North, Tijuca (close to the centre), and South, or N, T, and S; in each region were chosen one with a high reputation (+) and one viewed as the lowest-prestige one (-). Schools are thus mentioned here according both to region and prestige relative to its pair in the same region; for instance, the T+ school is a high-reputation one in Tijuca; N- is a low-prestige school in the North zone. There are striking socio-economic differences between these zones, with the ensuing differences in access to public equipment, cultural goods etc. The poorest, less well served region is the North zone, followed by Tijuca; the South zone concentrates the richest population. Due to the city's unique spatial distribution, in all zones there are slums next to urban consolidated areas. So all schools receive students living in slums or degraded areas.

⁸ Van Zanten (2005) created a typology of schools' selectivity, ranging from those with higher reputation and strict selectivity to those that have no choice, that 'inherit' students not admitted by the others.

Even among these, however, there are differences as to living conditions, following their distance from richer areas or from the city centre.

Data are organised by school. Students’ socio-economic level was estimated by information on household domestic appliances. And the mother’s schooling is an important indicator of the family cultural capital. Due to the high prevalence of lack of information on fathers, specially as one goes downward social stratification, this information was not collected. Graph 1 shows students’ socio-economic status (SES) totalled and standardised by school.

GRAPH 1
MEAN SOCIO-ECONOMIC LEVEL BY SCHOOL



There are evident contrasts both in terms of school region and between schools in the same region. Between North zone ones, N+ is in a poorer and more degraded area (subject to urban violence) than its correspondent one of low-prestige. In Tijuca, schools are geographically close, in a typical medium-class zone. In the South zone, both schools are in highly valued sites; S+ is located in an area with no slums, while S- is at a broadly accessible point. Hence SES differences between schools of the same region can not be explained by their geographical situation.

When considering SES differences across regions, N+ is slightly lower than S-. According to our observation during field work and to principals’ statements in interviews, high-prestige schools tend to attract students from distant areas, while low-prestige ones are attended practically only by students who live nearby. SES differences are also noticeable in direct observation at schools, where clothing and skin colour reinforce the impression of social imbalance.

By drawing on self-reported skin colour data, we created a dichotomic variable whites/non-whites⁹; Table 1 shows the distribution of white students per school. High-prestige schools have a higher proportion of white students; in both schools of the North zone such proportion is neatly lower than in the other regions. Although this might be an indicator of SES differences, we suspected it might reflect some kind of segregation by high-prestige schools, in student admittance or permanence. We have extensively tested this hypothesis by multivariable analysis, but could not confirm it¹⁰.

TABLE 1
SKIN COLOUR: DISTRIBUTION OF WHITE STUDENTS PER SCHOOL

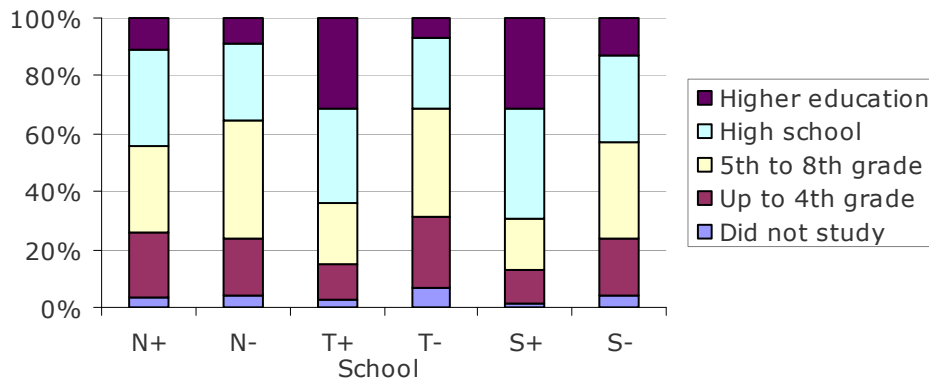
School		White students	Total of students
N+	n	292	684
	%	29.5	100.0
N-	n	61	257
	%	23.7	100.0
T+	n	183	436
	%	42.0	100.0
T-	n	195	297
	%	35.4	100.0
S+	n	170	393
	%	43.3	100.0
S-	n	183	583
	%	31.4	100.0
Total	n	904	2,650
	%	34.1	100.0

Concerning mothers' schooling, as expected, the pattern found is clearly associated to that of SES. However, School N+ data are closer to those of School N- than expected: the difference between the other schools "+" and "-" is much greater, particularly concerning mothers' higher education¹¹ (Graph 2).

⁹ Actually, the white group included orientals, but there are practically none of these in the city school network.

¹⁰ In view of the relevance of the issue to current debate, we made innumerable attempts to find significant differences for skin colour X socio-economic variables, but could find none.

GRAPH 2
MOTHERS' EDUCATIONAL LEVEL BY SCHOOL



Other data, relative to family structure, religion, previous schooling, self-image and peer influence, also show differences in student body composition between schools with high and low prestige. Students who attend high-reputation schools most often have biparental families, declare they have a religion, and have no (or almost none) friend who quitted school; they entered school at an earlier age and present a lower age-grade gap than students of low-prestige schools¹².

Such evidence is consistent with our hypothesis that mechanisms should be operating so that high-prestige schools (+) attract more “good” students than their counterparts. In order to check the operation of a hidden quasi-market in City-run schools in Rio, we used multivariate logistic regression analysis to assess factors that might help explain the probability of students being in high- or low-prestige schools, considering all the factors above mentioned: SES, mothers’ schooling, age at starting 5th grade, religion, type of family, friends who quitted studying, self-image, and reason for choosing the current school.

¹¹ Further studies are being carried out at School N+, since it presents an internal organisation pattern that differs from that of the other two “elite” schools (“+”).

¹² Due to lack of space, the description of these results was not included here, but they are available directly from the authors.

TABLE 2
CHANCES OF STUDENTS BEING IN HIGH- OR LOW-PRESTIGE SCHOOL: REGRESSION ANALYSIS

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

* p<0,05; ** p<0,001; Coefficients presented refer to Exp(B)

Dependent variable: school prestige (1 high, 0 low)

SES: Socio-economic level (standardised and weighted scale of household appliances)

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

Are religious: dichotomic (1 = Yes)

Type of family: reference category is "other types"

Friends quitted studying: ordinal 1 (none) to 5 (a lot)

Age entered 5th grade: whole numbers

Reasons for choice are not excludent

As expected, structural variables that indicate living conditions and access to public goods operated stably in all models: the family socioeconomic status and mothers' schooling have a relevant role in the access to high-prestige schools. Family origin advantages or disadvantages are combined to the student's previous schooling. The age at 5th grade indicates drawbacks in previous grades. The analysis showed that higher than ideal age at 5th grade considerably reduces (almost 20% per extra year) the chances of a student being in a high-prestige school. The high coefficients found for age difference by type of school clearly suggests the operation of selection mechanisms by schools. Some of these mechanisms were revealed by the qualitative study, such as "hiding" places or the plain rejection of students who come from bad-reputation schools. This is subtly done, by suggesting parents an

alternative school “more in conformity” with the schooling profile of the unwanted student¹³.

Finally, the regression analysis showed the weight of the reasons for having chosen the current school, reinforcing the possibility of selection by high-prestige schools. The choice for the school quality¹⁴ increases by five times, and the choice following friends’ advice doubles, the chance of students being enrolled in a School+, while the criterion that the school is near home reduces those chances to a half.

These data corroborate the findings of Alves & Soares (2007), that a longer or shorter home-school route is associated to the public school’s prestige. Our field work interviews showed that several students take a rather long way to come to schools+. Also, we heard from students that, when the school closest to home was considered a bad-reputation one, they chose among distant alternatives.

Students also reported on how difficult it was to get places in the “good” schools, while there remained plenty of vacancies in low-prestige schools. Since there is practically no dispute for public places in Rio de Janeiro, this points out to competition for quality places, evidencing school choice in this obscure quasi-market. Complementing quantitative evidence, we heard reports on a process known as “hiding” places: some high-reputation schools would adopt the practice of putting aside some 5th-grade “unavailable” places¹⁵, to be taken by parents indicated by politicians or members of the education administration staff or, possibly, for candidates with relatively high social capital.

FINAL COMMENTS

The use made here of the concept of quasi-market does not correspond to the original one: it was used for its descriptive and analytical potential. We don’t assume an *a priori* contrary to policies that, to some degree, encourage the free choice of schools and schools’ somehow controlled offer of places. However, our contact with literature and the results of the present study suggest that the hidden quasi-market which we evidenced in our context,

¹³ Further studies are in progress on the hidden procedures by which students with a certain profile and SES are kept away from high-prestige public schools. The study by Brito (2009), who interviewed teachers, presents remarkable results.

¹⁴ It is plausible that this answer (“for its quality”) be the combined effect of the school reputation and the process by which its students are proud of being in a “special” school.

¹⁵ We also heard about this occurring in the transition from early childhood education to elementary school.

allied to the well-known unsatisfactory conditions of public schools in Rio de Janeiro, has effects that foster inequality of opportunity.

In Brazil, as in societies of liberal tradition, the proposal of quasi-market mechanisms has met resistance and controversy. The trend is one to refuse any initiative that involves typical market mechanisms in the organisation of school systems, ever since the movement of educational reform in the 1980's. Diagnoses or management models that combine signalling by school assessment devices to school accountability or competition tend to face fierce hindrances. Nevertheless, this study shows intense family competition for public schools that are not outstanding when compared to good private or federal schools. Similarly to what Yair has observed, there is intense transit of students both inter- and intraschools. Hence, it seems that the concept of quasi-market may help understanding the studied phenomena.

In the competition among families for certain public schools, the school reputation is the informal sign. Such prestige is passed around by word of mouth among students, teachers, administrative staff, principals, parents, and seems to consubstantiate in inner relations and rules, in what has been conventionally called school climate¹⁶.

In families' access to specific public schools, economic bargain power is not the only thing that counts. Knowledge on the possibilities of choice is allied to a network of valuable social contacts¹⁷, besides, of course, families' own expectations. Also, intentional choice of the particular school is one of the outstanding statistical factors for the probability of enrolment in a high-prestige public school in Rio.

Several Brazilian scholars are against school choice by drawing on arguments of stratification and inequity, sustaining universal and inclusive principles that are not in conformity with the concrete functioning of public school networks. As Coleman (1992, p.261) argues, however, the absence of choice does not prevent stratification: Stratification among the elementary and high schools is not absent, just because choice is not allowed; it is present in the extreme, and it is present in a form that deprives it of the incentives that stratification systems at their best bring about.

In the present case, school choice may mean a school hidden quasi-market with a strong inequality pattern. Maybe the situation here described, of a hidden quasi-market – without the conceptual components of its adoption as a public policy – operating in a

¹⁶ See the review by Cunha (2007).

¹⁷ Which may range from a low-level official of education administration to a well-known politician.

Brazilian city context is generating more inequity than would do so the conspicuous criteria of an effective quasi-market, where choice rules are clearer, enrolment mechanisms are transparent, and signs of schools' proficiency are effective. Those really concerned with the country's apparently immobile educational disparities should welcome a system of choice based on standardised measurements and indicators of student flow. Even so, attention must be paid to the transit of students between schools and to discretionary elements in students admission, which may mask social segregation processes, hence preventing a satisfactory solution for the equity-quality binomial in our schools.

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