

## ARTICLE

# The *Programa Bolsa Família* and access to and staying in higher education through the *Programa Universidade para Todos*: the importance of getting by\*

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### ABSTRACT

This article focuses on a group of poor students enrolled in higher education courses whose trajectory is associated with two Brazilian federal public policies: the *Programa Bolsa Família* and the *Programa Universidade para Todos*. It aims to understand the trajectories of these students and their individual and/or family members strategies so that they could access and remain at the University, as well as analyze their views on the *Bolsa Família* and the *Programa Universidade para Todos*. The research was based on semi-structured interviews with nine students of a non-profit university located in the state of São Paulo. The interviews suggest that this small group of people have been subjected to high doses of effort and personal deprivation that may be considered high even in societies that claim to be meritocratic. The constant presence of situations that denote the “I did myself” in the school pathways and in the current higher course corroborates this understanding. The *Programa Universidade para Todos* comes to be well valued than the *Bolsa Família*, since it fits better in an understanding of being a “meritocratic” policy, rather than the cash transfer policy.

### KEYWORDS

*Programa Universidade para Todos*; *Bolsa Família*; higher education.

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## **O PROGRAMA BOLSA FAMÍLIA E O ACESSO E PERMANÊNCIA NO ENSINO SUPERIOR PELO PROGRAMA UNIVERSIDADE PARA TODOS: A IMPORTÂNCIA DO “EU ME VIRO”**

### **RESUMO**

Este artigo tem como objeto de pesquisa um grupo de alunos de baixa renda matriculados em cursos de ensino superior, cuja trajetória está associada a duas políticas públicas federais brasileiras: o Programa Bolsa Família e o Programa Universidade para Todos. Buscou-se compreender as trajetórias desses estudantes e suas estratégias individuais e/ou familiares para que eles pudessem acessar e permanecer na universidade, além de analisar seus pontos de vista sobre ambos os programas. A pesquisa baseou-se em nove entrevistas semiestruturadas com alunos de uma universidade sem fins lucrativos situada no interior do estado de São Paulo. As entrevistas sugerem que esse grupo reduzido de pessoas foi submetido a altas doses de esforço e de privação pessoal que podem ser considerados elevados mesmo em sociedades que pretendem ser meritocráticas. A presença constante de situações que denotam o “eu me viro” nos percursos escolares e no curso superior atual corrobora esse entendimento. O Programa Universidade para Todos é mais valorizado que o Bolsa Família, uma vez que se encaixa melhor em uma compreensão de ser uma política entendida como meritocrática, em vez de apenas uma política de transferência de renda.

### **PALAVRAS-CHAVE**

Programa Universidade para Todos; Bolsa Família; ensino superior.

## **EL PROGRAMA BOLSA FAMÍLIA Y EL ACCESO Y PERMANENCIA EN LA ENSEÑANZA SUPERIOR POR EL PROGRAMA UNIVERSIDADE PARA TODOS: LA IMPORTANCIA DEL “YO ME VIRO”**

### **RESUMEN**

Este artículo tiene como objeto de investigación un grupo de alumnos matriculados en cursos de enseñanza superior, cuya trayectoria está asociada a dos políticas públicas federales brasileñas: el *Programa Bolsa Família* y al *Programa Universidade para Todos*. Se buscó comprender las trayectorias de esos estudiantes y sus estrategias individuales y/o familiares para que ellos pudieran acceder y permanecer en la universidad además de analizar sus puntos de vista sobre ambos programas. La investigación se basó en nueve entrevistas semiestructuradas con alumnos de una universidad sin fines de lucro situada en el interior del estado de São Paulo. Las entrevistas sugieren que este grupo reducido de personas fue sometido a altas dosis de esfuerzo y de privación personal que pueden ser considerados elevados, incluso en sociedades que pretenden ser meritocráticas. La presencia constante de situaciones que denota el “yo me viro” en los itinerarios escolares y en el curso superior actual corrobora este entendimiento. El *Programa Universidade para Todos* es más valorado que el *Programa Bolsa Família*, ya que éste encaja mejor dentro de una comprensión de ser una política meritocrática, en vez de sólo una política de transferencia de renta.

### **PALABRAS CLAVE**

*Programa Universidade para Todos; Programa Bolsa Família; enseñanza superior.*

## INTRODUCTION

The research subject of this article is a group of students from poor backgrounds enrolled in higher education courses. The students' careers are associated with two specific Brazilian federal public programs: *Programa Bolsa Família* (or Family Allowance Program) and *Programa Universidade para Todos* (University for All Program — Prouni). A very small group of people experienced what many authors call improbable, atypical educational destinies for socially disadvantaged youth who were successful in their studies (Nogueira, 2014; Portes, 2015). In order to have a sense of how small the group of young people currently at university who made use of the *Bolsa Família* is, the study resorted to information in the *Cadastro Único para Programas Sociais do Governo Federal* (Unified Registry for Social Programs of the Federal Government — CadÚnico) from 2016 for all of Brazil, which can be accessed through the Ministério do Desenvolvimento Social (Ministry of Social Development) website. This data suggests that only 1.2% of young people between the ages 18 and 29 attended undergraduate and graduate degree programs.<sup>1</sup> In Brazil, the net enrollment rate in higher education for young people between the ages of 18 and 24 in 2015 was 18.1%.<sup>2</sup>

The eligibility criteria and target group for *Programa Bolsa Família* and Prouni are different. However, they are both meant for people with low income (defined by various criteria) and it can even be said that these programs complement each other. The former is a conditional cash transfer program created in 2003 by the federal government based on unifying and transforming existing cash transfer policies. *Bolsa Família* is aimed at poor families as defined by the *Ministério da Cidadania/Secretaria Especial do Desenvolvimento Social* (Ministry of Citizenship/Special Secretariat for Social Development) (Brasil, 2015) as those whose monthly per-capita income is up to R\$170.00. In the area of healthcare, the program requires pre-natal and post-natal care for mothers and nutrition and vaccination for children. In education, it requires a minimum of 85% school attendance for children between the ages of 6 and 15, and 75% for young people between 16 and 17. The program has steadily grown since it was implemented and by its tenth year it served nearly a quarter of the Brazilian population (Campello, 2013).

Prouni is aimed “at granting full and partial scholarships at 50% or 25% for students in undergraduate programs at non- or for-profit private institutions” (Brasil, 2005).<sup>3</sup> Full scholarships can only be granted to students whose family

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1 Information available at <https://aplicacoes.mds.gov.br/sagi/portal/index.php?grupo=212>. Accessed: Jan. 9, 2017.

2 Source: <http://www.observatoriodopne.org.br/indicadores/metas/12-ensino-superior/indicadores>. Accessed: Dec. 5, 2017.

3 It becomes important to consider, as does Almeida (2015), that Prouni is part of a lineage of public incentive policies for private for-profit institutions of higher education that date back to the 1970s. According to Almeida, the program emerged as a result of pressures on the private for-profit sector in relation with the chronic financial situation these institutions faced as a result of economic crisis of the governments of Fernando Henrique Cardoso in the 1990s. In Martins's words, “Prouni helped to reproduce mastodontic educational companies that are exempt from practically all the taxes they collected” (Martins, 2014, p. 7). For more information about the process of the establishment of the Brazilian private for-profit sector and its relationship to Prouni, consult Almeida (2014), particularly chapter II.

monthly per-capita income does not exceed one-and-a-half minimum-wage salaries.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, partial scholarships are granted to students whose monthly family per-capita income is no higher than three minimum-wage salaries.<sup>5</sup> In order to grant any of the scholarships — full or partial —, the student must have completed secondary education at a public school or at a private institution on a full-scholarship. Academic program selection depends on the grade the student obtains on the *Exame Nacional do Ensino Médio* (National Secondary Education Exam — ENEM), and the students have to obtain a score of at least 75% in all disciplines taken in each academic period (Almeida, 2015, p. 51). Such characteristics, as we will see below, are very important regarding how students evaluate Prouni. In 2014, ten years since Prouni was implemented, the program had granted 2,227,038 scholarships, of which 1,296,935 were full and 930,103 were partial scholarships (Marques, 2015, p. 55).

As can be noted, one of *Bolsa Família*'s target groups is children and youth up to age 17, who are required to meet a minimum attendance at school. Prouni is aimed at university students who, in a graded educational system like Brazil's, start their undergraduate studies at the age of 17 or 18. It is interesting to note that evidence Prouni's existence were already apparent in Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva government plan as a candidate in 2002, and he related it with the existing cash transfer program, thus signaling the complementarity of these two programs, as suggested here. The document's proposal number 19 titled "*Uma escola do tamanho do Brasil*" (A school as large as Brazil), aimed at "creating a university scholarship program within the scope of the National Program for the Minimum Wage to benefit 180,000 needy students who carry out their studies in validated courses and, in turn, perform community social work" (Prado and Ant, 2002, p. 31).

The questions that underpinned this research can be described as follows. What steps did these students take and what individual and/or family strategies did they adopt (before and after enrolling in higher education) so that they could have access to and stay at university? How important do the students consider inclusion policies like *Bolsa Família* and Prouni in their paths to higher education? The locus of this research is a non-profit university in the interior of the state of São Paulo attended by Prouni scholarship holders.<sup>6</sup> The information in this article is based on semi-structured interviews conducted with nine students randomly-selected from the institution's registry who had experience in both programs considered here (Prouni and *Bolsa Família*).

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4 In other words, R\$1,431, according to the minimum wage in 2018.

5 R\$2,862,00 in 2018 values.

6 According to the Declaration of Confidentiality for the Use of Socioeconomic Information, evaluated by the Ethics Committee for Research on Human Beings, no information that could identify the University or the students was published.

## PROGRAMA BOLSA FAMÍLIA/PROGRAMA UNIVERSIDADE PARA TODOS: STUDENT PROFILE<sup>7</sup>

From an approximate total of 18,000 students enrolled in undergraduate courses, the registry of the university studied presented data in 2016 for 2,073 Prouni scholarship students (approximately 11% of the total student body). Of this group, 120 students (6.1% of scholarship recipients) belonged to family groups that were receiving or had already received *Programa Bolsa Família* benefits. All the Prouni scholarship recipients at the university had full scholarships, since no partial scholarships had been granted. Unlike the research conducted by Almeida (2014), that focused on Prouni students at for-profit institutions, the research that led to this text was carried out on students at a non-profit university. As we will see below, the Prouni scholarship recipients are the “cream of the crop” of the social group they come from (Almeida, 2014, p. 196). Furthermore, the presence of these students at non-profit institutions of higher education raises some differences in relation to the scholarship-holders in the private for-profit segment. This applies especially in relation to the social recognition attributed to these universities, which, as such, is always relational. In dealing specifically with Catholic institutions of higher education, Sampaio suggests that ever since the establishment of this segment in the 1940s, it has claimed for itself a differential status, “whether in charge of education for the state, ... or as the provider of an alternative confessional sector funded using the same models as public education” (Sampaio, 2000, p. 48). There are distinctive elements in the statements of the students studied by Almeida (2014, p. 207) who attended non-profit institutions, compared to the others:

[...] the subgroup considered to be more select are the holders of both the recognition of their education, since they belong to programs and universities seen as more prestigious (PUC and Mackenzie) and, at the same time, owners of attributes that grant them advantages in the “cultural” dimension of symbolic capital [...] The good infrastructure provided by the university institution is also configured as a distinctive element.

Of the student body at the university studied, which as we saw has a certain specificity in terms of its recognition and prestige in Brazil’s private higher education sector, the Prouni students belong to a poorer group of students. The registry’s numbers show that those who receive or have received *Bolsa Família* funding are the most socioeconomically vulnerable group among the poorest students at the

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<sup>7</sup> The information described in this section was provided by the Registry of Scholarship-Holding Students at the university. The authors of this text developed the information. We appreciate the scholarship program administrators at the university for making the information available and for their generosity in accommodating the research that resulted in this text. Per our request, a question was included in the scholarship-holders’ re-registration process in 2016 that asked whether the student came from families that had ever received or were, at the time of re-registration, receiving funding from *Bolsa Família*.

university. As stated by an interviewee in the law degree program when asked whether there was anyone else that she knew in her classroom who received *Bolsa Família* funds:

No, there were, there were people with Prouni, but not in an economically unstable situation like mine [who receives *Bolsa Família*]. (Female interviewee, Law, 43 years old)

In summary, receiving or having received *Bolsa Família* increases the chances that these students attended only public secondary schools, have a parent with less education than those of their peers, and feature a higher proportion of fathers or mothers who have (completed or not completed) primary education. The percentage of fathers whose highest level of education is (complete or incomplete) primary education in the Prouni/*Bolsa Família* group is 38.4%, that is, 14.3 percentage points higher than observed for the education levels of the parents of students who only receive Prouni benefits. Regarding the highest level of education among mothers of students of former *Bolsa Família* beneficiaries, 43.3% had completed primary education, compared to the 31.4% of the rest of the Prouni students, a difference slightly lower than that observed among fathers (11.9 points), but no less significant. Regarding color/race, the percentage of students who receive or who have received *Bolsa Família* that declared themselves as black or dark-skinned (54.2%) is more than twice that observed between the rest of the Prouni students (25.4%). The proportion of women vs. men is 67.5% and 32.5%, with more women in the Prouni/*Bolsa Família* group, which is a bit higher than when considering the group of scholarship recipients who never received *Bolsa Família* benefits (60% and 40%). We point out that scholarship recipients enroll in the university at an average age of 20.5, higher, therefore, than that expected in a graded education system like Brazil's, namely, between the ages of 17 and 18. Regarding the students' income, the numbers reveal the financial challenges facing this group of students, whose monthly income is 12% lower than that of the rest of the Prouni scholarship recipients.

## METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The Annex shows information related to the students interviewed. Our research technique was semi-structured interviews structured according to a script of questions made up of four thematic blocks. The instrument for collecting the information foresaw some main questions for each block, but did so freely so that new questions could be included according to the dynamics of the interviews. The topics and questions were developed based on the knowledge accumulated through readings of studies that address poor students' access to and length of stay in higher education, many of which were used in this article, in addition to the hypotheses that guided the research. The first block, for instance, which was titled characterization of the interviewee and respective family, contains questions about the educational careers of the interviewees and their family members before the interviewee entered university. What we sought to understand in this block was

the role the family plays in facilitating (or not) the long-term educational careers that we will address below. The second and third blocks address issues related to admission to and length of stay in the university, two topics that are dear to poor students enrolled in higher education as shown in the literature on Prouni and other policies for access to university that will be addressed below. Questions related to Prouni and *Bolsa Família* were asked in the block on length of stay. The last block addresses issues related to the sociability of the interviewees.

All the interviews took place between the second semester of 2016 and the first semester of 2017 at the university's facilities. The students invited to participate were randomly selected from the registry of scholarship recipients at the institution as long as they met the following criteria: Prouni scholarship recipient and member of families that were receiving or had received funding from *Bolsa Família*. Initial contact was done via e-mail. Those who expressed an interest in participating in the research were contacted by phone to schedule the most convenient date, time, and place for conducting the interview. Interviews were transcribed in such a way that they maintained the oral language and redacted identifying information. The discussions were initially categorized based on thematic blocks as stipulated in the research outline. As will be seen as follows, the display of the research results generally followed the sequence of the structure set out in the research script.

## ATYPICAL EDUCATIONAL PATHS

In order to be able to understand how long the poor young people in this study stayed in the school system, it is important to study these students' careers before they entered higher education. It is, as we will see, a highly selective path in which "a minority of the best" are the only ones "to survive," to freely quote the expression coined by Elias and Scotson (2000). It is necessary to consider that this highly selective process, which sets barriers for the educational progress of the poorest, does not start with the advent of policies considered here, and it is a sort of constant problem in Brazilian educational institutions (Freitag, 2005; Portes e Cruz, 2007; Saviani, 2004).

Regarding the issue of unequal access to educational systems, Forquin (1995) showed that this topic has been prominent in educational research since the mid-1960s both in Europe and the United States. The results of these research studies conducted using different samples and methodologies point to a "a gently undisputable statistical fact", which would be that unequal access to education among social groups, "shaking the 'liberal' belief according to which expanding educational systems, facilitating (legal or material) access to studies, spreading 'meritocratic' beliefs and expectations were in themselves sufficient factors of 'democratization'" (Forquin, 1995, p. 23). Reports, like that of Plowden on Great Britain, or the famous Coleman report for the United States, showed that the origin of unequal performance among students has a lot more to do with family and social disparities than with material or pedagogical differences in schools (Forquin, 1995, p. 32). In this sense, this strengthens a series of studies focused on family attitudes and behaviors and their strategies regarding access to and time spent in educational systems. In Brazil,

ever since the 1990s, partly out of interest in considering the stories of subjects in educational research (Portes, 2015) and partly due to the movement of expanding and universalizing compulsory primary education in Brazil, which began a decade earlier and that contributed to increased enrollment numbers in secondary and higher education as seen in the following decades (INEP, 2017; Oliveira, 2007), confirmed a broader set of academic works regarding long-lasting and improbable school paths of this group of students from poor families.

Several authors have called attention to the importance of change of schools in these school paths, which tend to be unforgiving with poorer students. As stated by Junior, Mont'Alvão e Neubert (2015, p. 123-124):

The severe initial selectivity forces only the most capable, talented and dedicated students from disadvantaged backgrounds to reach the next stages. Their individual attributes end up being valued by the education system and tend to surpass their social disadvantages. Therefore, after the initial stages students in disadvantaged situations that overcome these obstacles generally show innate talent and develop abilities that tend to facilitate success at later stages, which tends to gradually decrease the effects of their origin.

Viana (2014) calls attention to the importance of the so-called “partial school successes” in the long-lasting school careers. According to the author,

Although they are partial successes, they were trump cards for the schooling mobility of the children/students themselves and their families. In other words, they contributed to the establishment of a sort of “logic of success,” which pointed to the possibility of continuing their studies, encouraging the family to invest in the schooling of that (those) child(ren). (Viana, 2014, p. 13-14)

In the interviews, it was possible to notice several situations that indicate these partial successes, especially in the younger interviewees who enrolled in the university at an age close to the one expected in a graded system such as Brazil's, that is, about 18. Attention is drawn to the efforts made by these people and their families to raise funds and engage people to help them escape the low-quality public school. Let's consider a few examples:

So, in the first and second year of high school, many teachers started to be absent from the public school. Then there was... It was constant the math teacher, there was a substitute, for Portuguese, science [...] And the teachers started to skip and then I said, “No, I need to change this”. So, there was a technical school, an ETEC (State Technical School) in my city, and I told my mom, “Mom, I do not have math class, so how am I going to advance?”. That is when I said, “No, I am going to try on my own... an ETEC”, and then, just like that, my mom said she would not be able to help me out much with my studies, look, then I said, “No, mom, don't worry about it, I will get by”. (Female interviewee, Physical Education, 23 years old)

In pre-school, I studied at the school in my neighborhood even though it was public and I do not remember its name now. And then in the first grade I stayed there until my mother switched me over to SESI (*Serviço Social da Indústria*) school. And so from second to eighth grade I studied at SESI. Then in high school I had some friends who studied at an ETEC in São Caetano [...] And at that time my aunt had a pizzeria. We lived on the same street. And I worked at that pizzeria with her. Then I really wanted to take the entrance exam for the ETEC. So I spent some time off work... six months I recall [...] So I spent a lot of time studying, my dream in life was to pass the exam. Then I passed and I went on to study at ETEC. (Female interviewee, Biology, 20 years old)

[...] in a way I always wanted to leave my city school, my public school, that was always my wish, so I applied to several scholarships, several exams for scholarships for private school, starting in the fourth grade. (Male interviewee, Medicine, 21 years old)

It is a foundation they put in place... to make school a full day. Since I live in a neighborhood on the outskirts, and they usually do a CDHU (*Companhia de Desenvolvimento Habitacional e Urbano do Estado de São Paulo*), they set up one of those. I studied at school in the mornings, and, in the afternoons, I would go to the foundation. (Female interviewee, Architecture, 20 years old)

It is noteworthy that what these careers have in common is the effort made to move from the bad quality public school to the good quality public school, in the case of the technical schools, or to private schools or foundations that, precisely because they offered better education, are competitive, even with selective admission processes. In the case of the first interviewee, what stands out is the emphasis made on the expression “I will get by”, “I am going to try on my own”, which points out the importance placed on personal effort in this successful transition to secondary education. In the second case, it is clear that this effort is not just personal, but also involves the family, since the interviewee had to stop working at the pizzeria in order to study for the technical school admissions exam. The third case explicitly portrays the desire to leave public school, as well as the challenge of taking an exam for a private school scholarship. The “I will get by” notion in this case appears to be combined to the interviewee’s very work in the sense of making his studies feasible while still contributing to family income, as seen in the statement below:

[...] my routine was, basically, I would wake up in the early morning, at the beginning of the day I would do various types of farming and then return in the afternoon, just before the scheduled class time, I took a shower and went to class. So it was basically that. And then, that, [...] and that was a more tiresome, exhaustive routine, at times several times I would fall asleep in class. (Male interviewee, Medicine, 21 years old)

The meaning of “I get by,” which as we saw covers not just the individual but also his/her family, points to a certain abandonment in relation to the educational institutions that might not be doing their part in providing the proper conditions for a better education. These are people who seem to always be chasing after something as a way of compensating for an initial deficit brought about by their position in society. Almeida’s research, which was carried out on almost 50 Prouni students in the state of São Paulo, also showed considerable dissatisfaction regarding public education. A series of problems in the public education space mark the careers of these students, such as the constant absence of teachers, problems with the teachers’ educational backgrounds, the precariousness of the facilities and materials, among others. The way out is similar to what is seen in the interviews, i.e., getting by to exit the bad quality public school in order to go to better public schools like the technical schools or schools located in the city center (Almeida, 2014, p. 187-190).

The “I will get by” statement clearly appears in many other situations, such as studying with lessons on YouTube, class booklets downloaded from the internet, among other actions, as seen below:

I studied on my own, too... to do so I had my course booklet and my friend and I would work on exercises... It is not a very good course booklet, to be honest. But it had exercises. If you look for answers online, you can find them [...]. No, it was not very easy at all. (Female interviewee, Physical Education, 23 years old)

So, I looked online a lot. I searched a lot for tests that had... that others had already done... and I kept trying to work through exams. I practically studied through the internet. Video classes. (Female interviewee, Biology, 20 years old)

Yes, in order to do it I studied on my own. From there I went through this process [a popular university entrance exam prep course] and then I enrolled. Every Saturday I would take day-long classes at the study center. And from there each person studies and gets better [...] studying alone later. [...] It is quite hard. (Female interviewee, Social Sciences, 31 years old)

I put a lot of effort into it, I study a lot, I really think a lot, I study a lot in the morning, anywhere, so I think I am always studying, so I think that through my effort I am going to be able to make it. (Female interviewee, Law, 43 years old)

The importance attributed to personal effort as a way to justify the success in long-lasting educational paths appears in other similar studies. The work of Lahire (1997) demonstrated how the success in school of children from families with low economic, cultural and educational capital is often due to the establishment of an “ethic of perseverance” that implies a certain ability to instill certain attitudes and behaviors in their children, such as respect for school officials, being docile, and, above all, cultivating autonomy.

Autonomy seen as bodily self-discipline (how to repress desires, be well-behaved, stay calm, listen, raise your hand before speaking, start to work without the teacher having to say so, impose regularity on work and effort, to be organized...) and as mental self-discipline (how to do an exercise alone, without the teacher's help, without asking anything, reading silently and solving a problem on one's own, *knowing how to get by on one's own* by doing a school exercise only with the written instructions...). The term "autonomy" seems to crystallize a set of characteristics valued from the educational point of view. (Lahire, 1997, p. 58-59, emphasis ours)

Thus it is important to consider that the transmission of this social capital to children involves the creation of relationships and ties with the parents that are neither direct nor automatic. Lahire found several situations in which parents with high levels of cultural capital did not manage to transmit this to their children. Inversely, parents with low levels of schooling, but with time and commitment, managed to create a very positive effect of school socialization on their children (Lahire, 1997). Coleman summarizes this process well:

It is of course true that children are strongly affected by the human capital possessed by their parents. But this human capital may be irrelevant to outcomes for children if parents are not an important part of their children's lives, if their human capital is employed exclusively at work or elsewhere outside the home. The social capital of the family is the relations between children and parents (and, when families include other members, relationships with them as well). That is, if the human capital possessed by parents is not complemented by social capital embodied in family relations, it is irrelevant to the child's educational growth that the parent has a great deal, or a small amount, of human capital. (Coleman, 2007, p. 88)

In the path traced by Lahire, Portes (2010) identified an effort of "instilling a domestic moral order in children" in the educational careers of six poor children who enrolled in highly-prestigious courses at the *Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais* (UFMG) between 1990 and 1996. This moral order values determination — hard work, strength of will and high self-esteem — overcoming among other attitudes that indicate a person's own effort from the perspective of educational success. In a study that analyzed the paths of poor students in Salvador, Brazil, who had just entered higher education, Costa and Cunha (2007, p. 8) state:

This issue of one's own effort is quite recurrent. Given the considerable barriers that these young people face, the feeling that they are great fighters — and winners — in an adverse world is a trait that many of them have in common. A certain sociological perspective would tend to minimize this element and treat it as merely "ideology." However, we can consider this search for overcoming as a particular trait that in addition to highlighting the unequal social structure of opportunities reveals the individual dimension as also important for us to think about.

The results from a research study carried out by the *Fundação Perseu Abramo*, connected to the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (Workers Party — PT), which sought to understand the political values held by people living on the outskirts of the city of São Paulo, corroborate the answers given by the Prouni students. This study conducted 63 in-depth interviews and 5 focus groups with residents from the outskirts of the city of São Paulo with an income below 5 minimum-wage salaries and who had voted for the PT in elections from 2002 to 2012, but who stopped voting for the party in the following elections (2012, 2016). Although the study is not set up as an academic work, a point explicitly made in the objectives of the paper, and, therefore, not held to the rigorous standards in terms of methodology and procedures of a study of this type, besides flirting with a sort of economic determinism regarding events in culture and politics, the report points out a few issues related to personal merit and effort that make it possible for us to relate it with the answers given by the university students considered in this study. One of the conclusions drawn from the research is that, among the interviewees who live on the outskirts, there is an overestimation of the value of merit in their personal careers.

- In order to become someone in life work and effort are necessary.
- Although they know that the opportunities are not the same for all and that it is necessary to democratize them, they consistently quote the discourse that there are no insurmountable barriers — “with effort you can overcome anything”.
- This thinking has resonance especially among the youngest people whose perception of “limits” on upward mobility are even greater than those of the older people. (Fundação Perseu Abramo, 2017, slide 21)

In this context of valuing merit, school plays a fundamental role in legitimizing successful paths. According to the aforementioned report,

school is a tool for social mobility: it is the key for someone to be “someone in life”, it is the first step along a linear path: having access to studies, doing well at school and achieving a diploma will lead to gaining a good job, access to consumption and having a “place in the world”. (Fundação Perseu Abramo, 2017, slide 38)

## ADMISSION TO UNIVERSITY

Now let us address university admissions. In this vein, attention is first drawn to the importance of the ENEM in terms of granting admission to the university we studied. Everyone entered the university through the ENEM and appreciated how this program expanded the range of possible institutions of higher education to choose from. In the words of a student interviewed by Gonçalves, “It is as if it were a trampoline, that tosses those who are from the lower classes onto the trampoline. The person jumps and enters university” (Gonçalves, 2017, p. 161).

Almeida (2014, p. 240) also highlights the importance of the ENEM as a passport to higher education for poor students. From his perspective, the exam's format, which gives preference to reading comprehension and situations related to daily life to the detriment of the content of required disciplines, favors these students who had to deal with the problems of public school in their educations, mentioned in the previous pages. Regarding the youngest students, it is noted that the choice of the university where they currently study, was not the first option, in that they tried, unsuccessfully, to enter public universities and they poured lots of effort into university entry exam preparation courses. Looking at a few more statements reveals yet again the importance of the "I will get by" attitude in these students' careers:

So, actually I wanted to go to UNICAMP (*Universidade Estadual de Campinas*) [...] So I started to pay for the admissions exam prep course with the money I worked for... And it was a night course. I took the course for 1 year, I took the UNICAMP exam. I did not pass the first stage. [...] Then I took the ENEM and I got a really good score again and I applied for Prouni, you know? And I set this university as my top choice. (Female interviewee, Physical Education, 23 years old)

Ah... the university entry exams are very difficult, very difficult. I passed, I know that I passed the first stage for UNESP (*Universidade Estadual Paulista "Júlio de Mesquita Filho"*), as far as I recall. But it's just that in the first year, I started, oh my, I am going to study for the entrance exam, but then it started, it started to dawn on me that ah, it was also the last year of school. I did not have enough time to study for the entrance exam and make the most of school. (Female interviewee, Architecture, 20 years old)

In fact, it went like this, I signed up for UFSCAR's (*Universidade Federal de São Carlos*) program in environmental management analysis as my top choice, and then I did not get in. I got into my second choice, which was Prouni here. (Female interviewee, Biology, 20 years old)

I had this story of not wanting to go to a private institution, even with Prouni. This was due to, like, sometimes you know, the institution, private secondary schools encourage you to enter the federal and state schools, so I had that in my head. When I managed to get Prouni, my parents said, "You are going and that's it" [...] I took, I think, ten or eleven different admissions exams for private and public institutions [...] I got in here, among the private universities, at ABC Paulista, UNIVAS (*Universidade do Vale do Sapucaí*), Alfenas, and among the federal institutions, I made it into the second stage for UNESP and I got into the *Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro*, through ENEM, too. (Male interviewee, Medicine, 21 years old)

It's importante to note, according with previously statements, that undergraduate studies at a private institution was completely absent from the set of

possible choices for low-income youth, despite having good grades and the ability to rely on, in principle, Prouni. In this sense, it is important to consider that for this smaller group of students with a background in the *Bolsa Família*, the likely destination for higher education has not been, as at first would be expected, public institutions (Piotto, 2014), but rather in the private sector with scholarship funding. The microdata from the 2016 *CadÚnico* corroborates this understanding: of the scholarship students attending higher education programs, 51% of them were enrolled in private institutions and 49% in public ones.

In the perspective of the older interviewees, that is, those over 30, the decisive factor for choosing the undergraduate course and, within their possibilities, the university they currently study at is related to the connections that these students had with religious institutions. Following are a few examples:

So, I converted to protestant Christianity at the time. I started to attend church... [...] It is just that soon thereafter I had the opportunity to go study in Petrolina, Pernambuco, to attend a seminary for theology. Since I was heavily involved in the field of religion, I thought, "Huh, I want to grow in this field, I want... I want to be skilled in theology". And that is when I accepted the proposal that was made. [...] So, he [the priest] offered me a full scholarship, so I appreciate him a lot, because without his vision for... education for training young people in theological education, perhaps I would not be here at university. (Male interviewee, Philosophy, 31 years old)

I entered the convent. However, I was always thinking ahead and fueling my desire for Psychology. And then, for various reasons, the process for undergraduate studies in the congregation with university validation, or something like that, kept being postponed, since there are other things that happen before that in the training process. How did I get into Sociology and how did it come up in me after all this time? It was due to the pastor activities in my youth, from my social militancy, from all the struggle I withstood in this time. (Female interviewee, Social Sciences, 31 years old)

I studied partly in Piauí and another part in [...] Maranhão, primary and secondary education. But my path led me to spend some time in a convent, I spent a lot of time in the convent and, and that is where you had the option, if you wanted, to stop, if you finished secondary school, the nuns would ask you: "Do you want to take a break for, or do you want to keep on studying? The break for studying more about the doctrine, right?". (Female interviewee, Law, 43 years old)

In the effort of analyzing how long Prouni students stayed in school based on the existing literature on this topic, Santos (2015) identifies a set of works that highlight the importance of this program regarding the incentive for people over 25 to return to school. Regarding the challenges shared by socioeconomically disadvantaged students when they enter higher education, the older students have to deal with other obstacles that assume additional doses of effort and dedication:

“This is because belonging to older age groups tends to be accompanied by greater economic and family responsibilities at home and, soon after, less availability for studying” (Santos, 2015, p. 168). The factor that sets the sample considered in this work apart was the weight that religious institutions had on these older students’ careers in the sense of favoring the continuity of their studies and admission into university. The deepening of this research study, as well as others related to this topic, will be able to suggest whether it is about a specific phenomenon that has to do with the researched university or if it is present in other contexts.

## LENGTH OF STAY: A FISH OUT OF WATER

After admission to the university, which, as we have seen, is preceded by a highly selective educational path full of personal and family efforts, a new series of difficulties arise in relation to adapting to this new environment. The transition to higher education indeed has an impact on all students, not just the poorest. Nevertheless, since many of them are the first in their families to enter a higher education program, they do not have a host of experiences to draw on to lessen these impacts. It is clear from the statements that this is a rough transition that often reveals these young people’s lack of preparation in the educational institutions they studied in, despite all their efforts to “make it.” The terms and concepts that are “naturally” recognized by the other classmates must be the subject of study for them. Following are some examples:

Well, it was difficult, it was actually arriving and almost from another world. I felt like a fish out of water... [at the university]. Completely aimless, in that way... (Female interviewee, Social Sciences, 31 years old)

But those who did all their studies in private school had an easier time writing summaries, papers [...] the change was wrenching... You have freedom, the words of academia are different from those in school. Here there is a specific name for everything, specific words of the profession. That presents you with a real challenge... [...]. So, you have to learn that all on your own, with books and the professor’s teaching method. (Female interviewee, Physical Education, 23 years old)

For example, photosynthesis was something I knew the basics of. In Biology, everyone knew what it was and how it occurred, because everyone was from private school... [...] I was even embarrassed to speak because I thought, who knows, I did not know anything about anything. [...] I always felt that this was something like a fashion show. And then I even felt pretty bad about it. And my mother, who helped me a little at the beginning. I would say, “Mom, give me some clothes, because oh my, people dress as if they were going to the shopping mall there”. [...] I never went to parties and the like because parties at the university were very expensive. So, that is why I also threw a lot of parties at my home. Because I did not have to pay, right? It was a way of skirting around that. (Female interviewee, Biology, 20 years old)

I had some in the first semester when... since I come from a family that has it... very... very rough, very, there was no financial backing when I entered the university, I, you know, it was really a blow, I do not know if that is the right word, if there even is one... I was kind of taken by surprise. I walked into the room, I was the only one who was different. [...]. Because when I walked in, I was wearing flip-flops, I did not even have... it was cold and I did not even have something warm to wear. I was embarrassed to tell people, too. That I was in need. (Female interviewee, Law, 43 years old)

A few of the characteristics that can be extracted from the interviews help us to understand how these challenges are actually experienced. In the first case, the mention of the image of a fish out of water, of being completely aimless in the university, reveals how strange the place and the people in it made the interviewee feel. A world that did not belong to here and that she will now have to confront. The second and third examples share the feeling that the interviewees' education, even though better in relation to other people of their social class, was not enough to prepare them adequately for University, especially when compared to students from private schools. What would be "natural" to the latter, how to write a summary, knowing the specific names of the terms and concepts of their fields, must be learned by the "getting by" approach. The third and fourth statement show how clothing is an important marker of difference in the university space. Buying second-hand clothes and shoes online was an alternative for the interviewee to interact in the university's "shopping mall" atmosphere with her other classmates, as she mentioned. Likewise, the "getting by" approach also appears in the social networks, like in the case of holding parties at home in order not to have to go to night clubs with a cover charge. The last statement shows the "blow" of entering a higher education program, as well as the suffering from wearing flip-flops and no warm clothing in the cold.

Statements collected by Débora Piotto from five students from lower classes enrolled in a highly-selective program at the *Universidade de São Paulo* (USP) show a similar trend. In various student accounts the author noted the feeling of being "out of place," of not belonging to the places and codes of the university. Below is an example:

It was very complex for me, it was, at first, to be studying with people I served at the bar. [...] there was a huge party [...] all I wanted at the time was to have a tray in my hand so that I would know what to do as a waiter! [laughter] At the party I noticed what I felt like, I don't know, a little like I was not yet, I am not quite sure how to say it, in that universe yet, it still was not mine, I wanted the tray and, I saw a friend of mine [...] complaining, indignant because he did not have a phone to connect to the internet, whereas my concern at the moment was: "What am I going to eat? How am I going to maintain myself here?". (Piotto, 2014, p. 146)

Portes also draws attention to the challenges faced in social relations, especially regarding the wardrobe issue. By addressing the relationship with the colleagues of an interviewee from the UFMG, the author discusses

[...] the impossibility for [Alice] to clearly express her social class to the group whose social practices are far from her possibilities (having a car, dressing well, being able to buy books, participate in an expensive secret Santa, eating in a restaurant, going out on the weekends, going to the lounge, playing go-karts) [...]. “As an adolescent I was crazy about clothes, discs, travel, deprived of these goods by classmates who had them”. In turn, Alice feels the need to deny her social origin, despite making it clear to her class that she did not have money. However, by the fourth semester she still had not told her classmates that her father was a truck driver. “I did not have the courage”. (Portes, 2014, p. 201)

In the statement made by the law student, the only direct beneficiary of *Bolsa Família* among the interviewees, it was interesting to note how the role of strategies for maintaining the university environment can include the very affirmation of poverty in a context marked by richer students. In the case at issue, the student seems to have become a sort of “class social project”, which had some advantages despite exposing her condition of being poor and a *Bolsa Família* recipient.

So, I mentioned to the, I got close to a girl in class, I did not even know her very well, and I just mentioned that I had been robbed along with all my documentation and that I did not know how I was going to get by until my *Bolsa Família* benefit was paid, I had fifty reals. And then she mentioned, it was a class with a professor who, very good professor, [...] she really was really into human rights issues, and then she mentioned in her class that I had been robbed, that we, that I was a student and already in the university program, and they collected almost three hundred reals on that very day. (Female interviewee, Law, 43 years old)

Since then, the student’s socialization process seems to have been facilitated precisely because of her poverty. In an unusual process, poverty itself, which used to be the theme of exclusion, was used by the student as a strategy for getting to know the other classmates better:

Female interviewee: That is when it started, it was then, until then they did not know that I needed anything. From that moment on, they started to ask, “Do you need anything? Don’t be shy, you can tell me”.

Male interviewer: I see. So from then on your relationship with them was...

Interviewee: Then, it took off from there. It seems that I needed to be robbed, lose my documentation... (Female interviewee, Law, 43 years old)

A similar situation, also marked by ambivalence, was reported in a statement by a student from USP named Marcos, described in the above-mentioned research by Piotto (2014). In this case, his condition as a working student was used as a way of having better interactions with her classmates. However, it came at a certain cost.

Marcos's personal background was a very important resource for him in the task of finding a place in the new world that was being presented to him. However, according to his evaluation, it made interactions with classmates even harder, since it ended up, in his own words, "reducing everything to proletariat status" and relating him to representation and not to concrete people who became his new colleagues in higher education. Although on the one hand he benefitted from declaring himself a working student, since it helped him face a new situation, it was bad, in his opinion, because it got in the way of real interactions with others. (Piotto, 2014, p. 147)

Regarding the support that these students received from their families, the analysis of the interviews conducted to date suggests that there are two different patterns. On the one hand, there are families who fully support, within their means, their children by absorbing all or part of the income that they could earn if their only activity were work. Clearly, within these families' unstable situations, this support is typically poorly planned and short-term. "These are families who cannot predict (nor control) their material situation. The best they can do is make adjustments within their means so that the child does not give up on the effort made thus far [...]" (Portes, 2010, p. 66).

On the other hand, there are families whose children's education ends at secondary education, whether it trained them professionally or not. The financial burden of prolonging studies into higher education would thereof relay on the children themselves, forcing them, of course, to have to work in order to support themselves while at university. The way these cases are portrayed shows once again the importance of the "getting by" spirit in these students' careers:

So they could not help even in this way because these are families of masons and cleaners, so they do not have anything, I really did not have anything, no matter how much I wished, I did not have anything, I had no financing to help me and I had no one to rely on because they had no sense of what was worth studying, right? (Female interviewee, Law, 43 years old)

If you want it you pay for it, I [father] am not going to pay for medicine because I know that it will go away, you are only thinking about now, because you think you are not going to make it. Like, I only pay for medicine if you want it, but if you don't want it, you work your magic. (Male interviewee, Medicine, 21 years old)

Regarding work, the effort of balancing work and school in order to support oneself at university revealed grueling situations full of heavy personal sacrifice, be it financial or emotional.

So I came to school in the morning, I would leave them [my children] at day-care, I would stay at the university and at times I would not have lunch for months. I would eat one or two *pão de queijo* (cheese bread made with tapioca

flour) with coffee and that was my lunch. [...] Since we are talking and, I do not need to be ashamed of talking, so I needed to increase my income a bit, I chose to do some cleaning, so I would go, sometimes I would even clean for my own classmates because I had reached the limit, I was having *pão de queijo* for lunch every day. (Female interviewee, Law, 43 years old)

You, from midnight to 6 a.m., you discover that your time at school is very precious. So, basically it is the schedule for our in-depth studying [...] at first it was difficult, so much so that I used to sell cakes in order to make extra income, when I wanted to go to a competition or something else, I made my living selling cakes and sweets here in the university [...] working even at night or on the weekend to make extra income, so this is common among the Prouni students. (Male interviewee, Medicine, 21 years old)

They are “hard-working students” whose university survival is marked by a triple responsibility insofar as they take on family, professional and student tasks (Almeida, 2014, p. 227).

## PROGRAMA UNIVERSIDADE PARA TODOS AND PROGRAMA BOLSA FAMÍLIA

How do students evaluate Prouni? In general, the answers obtained do not differ from the perceptions of Prouni students seen in other research studies. They tend to value Prouni, since from this program they had the opportunity to enter university, but they are critical regarding the fact that access is a stage of their experience in higher education. In this sense, Prouni does not address extremely important issues regarding the students’ stay, understood in a broad sense that includes such factors as transportation, room and board, purchasing materials, and even wardrobe, as we have already seen. Following are a few more examples:

This opportunity to go to university, for a young poor black man to be at university, broaden his knowledge and perhaps make it possible to participate in fairer competitions, this opportunity is very special. But at the same time, it is... There are many challenges, because you may have won a scholarship, but you do not have a place, like in the United States, you do not have a place to maintain yourself [...]. So, he is at university, but he does not have a structure [...]. (Male interviewee, Philosophy, 31 years old)

Since Prouni itself is great, it gave me this opportunity to be here at university [...] But I feel that we are placed here and that’s it, you know. There isn’t any kind of support. It is as if they threw people from Prouni and presto. There isn’t any kind of assistance that helps us even for staying. That is the key word. Staying. (Female interviewee, Biology, 20 years old)

Yes. Ah, it is because it opened a door for me that I probably would not be able to open because architecture is an expensive program and I also would not have had the means to kill myself studying in a prep course for many years in order to pass. so, Prouni was an way for me to reach, to get into a good-quality course. (Female interviewee, Architecture, 20 years old)

I think it is an excellent program that needs to be improved. For example, some of the ways that it needs to be looked at is housing. [...] I have the means to keep going to university because it is a full scholarship, since that makes life and everything else easier, but on the other hand it needs some help in terms of housing. (Female interviewee, Social Sciences, 31 years old)

Even the interviewee in the medical program, who due to the fact of being in a full-time course is eligible for the aid established by Prouni to defray living expenses, shows the inadequacy of this aid. As he himself states:

[...] it is a stipend of R\$400.00, nobody manages to survive, to stay in a city like this one that has very high costs. (Male interviewee, Medicine, 21 years old).

In this interview it is interesting to note that the student suggests that the Prouni recipients, in addition to the stipend for living expenses with more funds, they should have psychological help to deal with the trouble of dealing with the university environment. In other words, the upkeep and stay in higher education is not only related to strictly economic issues, but rather, it involves psychological and academic attention.

Our work in itself is to listen to people, solve other people's problems, all this becomes, makes up a snowball that just keeps growing until it sort of just runs you over, it kills you. So, this type of psychosocial support that is not there, Prouni is not set up for having and is not ready for. (Male interviewee, Medicine, 21 years old).

It is important to report that the interviewees pointed out situations where they felt or witnessed some type of discrimination. Below are some examples:

I have also heard "Oh you are at university because in addition to being black you are Prouni"... as if it were not for that you would not be able to do it. (Male interviewee, Social Sciences, 31 years old)

For example someone already, there was a discussion in class and a guy said "Oh... yes... but... if my father works in order to pay, why doesn't yours?". Then I was like, "Hum, I am not sure where to start, you know..." [...]. Oh, this was in the middle of the classroom in front of a professor [...]. I have already heard it directly, like, I had a classmate and one of my classmates said her father was paying for my university, because he was a taxpayer. I pulled a bill out of my pocket and I told her, this is how much he pays in my six years. Another clas-

smate told me that, another colleague heard that she did not know why there were such programs as Prouni when this person's father woke up early to work, like my classmate heard that. She told me that and the minute it came out of her mouth I said, wow isn't that cool, I would wake up at 4 a.m. to work and study. [...] I had a professor in the first semester who thought that a student who worked could not do Medicine. I do not know where he came up with this idea, like, but he would say that. (Male interviewee, Medicine, 21 years old)

The statements collected in the interviews suggest that prejudice, be it from paying students, be it from professors, is part of the experience of these young people in higher education. They differ, therefore, from the bibliographic research results on the topic, carried out by Santos, in which "relationships between scholarship recipients and paying students are not described as being conflictive [...] The situations of discrimination thus seem to be infrequent" (Santos, 2015, p. 173). In any case, deepening the research could reveal whether this is a feeling that belongs to the group of students interviewed or if it is something that enables some kind of generalization.

Whereas Prouni, in spite of its problems, is valued by the interviewees, the same cannot be said about *Bolsa Família*, at least not as intensely as with the former. Thus it is important to emphasize that the interviewees were selected from a Registry with information obtained from a questionnaire among Prouni scholarship recipients. This questionnaire included a question about whether the recipients or anyone in their families was receiving or had received *Bolsa Família*. Only the students who answered yes to this question were selected to participate in the interviews. However, two female interviewees stated that they had never received *Bolsa Família* benefits.

So, I did not get *Bolsa Família*, I think my family did not get that. For that reason I think I learned about the program, yeah... I do not know if my family ever used it, but it is for people with really low income. (Female interviewee, Physical Education, 23 years old)

But I do not receive *Bolsa Família*. (Female interviewee, Biology, 20 years old)

The others who received *Bolsa Família* valued the program in terms of the benefits it provided for other family members, but not necessarily directly for themselves.

I did not see much of *Bolsa Família*. [...] To me it was already gone... at home it helped a lot. And I see the program contributing a lot today to my sisters, to my sister who receives it and for the others who already received it. (Female interviewee, Social Sciences, 31 years old)

My mother and my sister have participated in it [...] My background does not include *Bolsa Família*. My story is related to Prouni, not with *Bolsa Família*. (Male interviewee, Philosophy, 31 years old)

The exception is due to the interviewee from the Law program, a beneficiary

But it was thanks to *Bolsa Família* that I managed to get in, to make it to college and to support myself even with all the challenges. Even though... there were days where I did not have anything to eat, but as the date neared, I knew that I would have money and that I would be able to make it, you know? (Female interviewee, Law, 43 years old)

Two hypotheses can be considered to understand the evasive stances (in the case of the interviewees who denied having received the benefit) or the notion that the program did not directly provide them with benefits. First of all, the possible effect of the street demonstrations starting in 2013 and emphasized in 2015 and 2016 in Brazil, in which state social spending, especially *Bolsa Família*, came under attack by the upper and middle classes and was heavily covered by the media. In an environment that is mostly attended by young, middle-class people, and having already experienced situations as Prouni students, perhaps the interviewees did not feel free to say that they were *Bolsa Família* beneficiaries. Another hypothesis can be drawn from the aforementioned report from the *Fundação Perseu Abramo*. It showed that interviewees valued the social programs of PT governments, but to a degree. Programs that preferred participants on the basis of merit like Prouni, which selects students based on their ENEM scores, were valued more than others like *Bolsa Família*, which were aimed at everyone who had a certain monthly income.

## FINAL COMMENTS

Is there a limit to the strengthening of ideals and practices that value merit and personal/family effort as a way of climbing up in society? This question is hard to answer.

What the interviews suggest is that this smaller group of people, which experienced atypical educational fates for socially disadvantaged youth, was subjected to high doses of effort and personal sacrifice. Some evidence presented in the previous pages corroborates the understanding of resorting to the “I get by” attitude in the educational careers and in the current higher education programs of the students interviewed. We saw that this meaning does not cover just the individuals but also their families and signals a certain abandonment by the public institutions that might not be doing their part to provide a better-quality education. Common situations in which personal and/or family resources are used to escape public school at the primary education level frequently appear in student accounts.

Admission to higher education is another stage that demands additional cost. The analysis of the interviews showed that choosing the university where students currently study was not the top choice, given that they had made frustrated attempts to enter public institutions. Likewise, interrupting studies after finishing secondary education to be able to work makes many of these students return to their studies at an older age than their classmates. Once they are in the university, they face other challenges. The statements made it clear that this is a rough adaptation, which often

points out these students' lack of preparation at the educational institutions they studied at despite all their efforts to "get by." Terms and concepts that are "naturally" recognized by the other classmates are forcibly an additional subject of study for them, especially those who returned to their studies after a long hiatus from their educational careers. In addition to all this, they often encounter prejudice because they are beneficiaries of social inclusion policies.

We thus encounter a perverse and exclusivist facet of our system that undermines students from poor families in their educational paths. Based on the information presented here, the small group of students from socioeconomically-less-advantaged social groups that entered higher education was subjected to hyper-selective processes at previous stages, which required additional doses of motivation, commitment and the development of personal abilities while navigating a highly hierarchical system that would "naturally" expel them. In this sense, it was important to note in the interviews that the issue of how long a student stays in school does not only involve economic factors but others, too, such as academic, sociability, emotions, etc.

Do the social inclusion policies in question, Prouni and *Bolsa Família*, favor these successful careers? Considering the analysis of the interviews conducted, it is possible to say they do. In this sense, Prouni is valued more than *Bolsa Família*, since it fits in better with the sense of being a "meritocratic" rather than a cash transfer policy. Additionally, there is the fact that the students were connected to Prouni at the time they were interviewed, whereas *Bolsa Família* seems to be somewhat distant, since in most cases the interviewees were not the direct beneficiaries of the program, although their families were, or even because of the hypotheses discussed regarding how that program was perceived post-2013. Both policies favor what was underscored in the documentary by Ana Fonseca as being the "Issue of Opportunity" (2017), which was rapidly leveraged by effort and personal/family merit, thus making lasting and atypical careers, with all the suffering, setbacks and prejudices discussed above possible.

Finally, we have yet to ask about the pertinence of reflecting on the transition mechanisms of *Bolsa Família* recipients to other policies such as Prouni for access to higher education as a way of confronting the starkly atypical nature of the careers discussed here.

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### Annex 1 – Information of the interviewed students

Interviewee	Age	Sex	Date of interview	Place of birth	Academic Program
1	20	Female	November 10, 2016	Florianópolis, Piauí	Biology
2	20	Female	June 22, 2017	São José dos Campos, São Paulo	Architecture
3	21	Male	May 8, 2017	São Sebastião do Dourado, Minas Gerais	Medicine
4	23	Female	November 1, 2016	Livramento, Bahia	Physical Education
5	30	Female	October 24, 2017	Pedreiras, Maranhão	Education
6	30	Female	May 25, 2017	Campinas, São Paulo	Social Science
7	31	Male	November 24, 2016	São Raimundo Nonato, Piauí	Philosophy
8	31	Female	December 7, 2016	Campo Formoso, Bahia	Social Science
9	43	Female	May 3, 2017	São Miguel do Tapuia, Piauí	Law

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