

# School choice, family mobilization and school performance

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## ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the results of research which aims at deepening the understanding of the influence of families on the school performance of their children. It presents the analysis of 33 interviews with student's families of elementary public schools of Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais. It considered cases of the worst and the best performances of such students, as well as the profile of the school attended, and the results on Prova Brasil. This analysis allows the drawing of two types of conclusions. On one hand, the weight of the objective life conditions in the school performance stands out. On the other hand, when secondary differences regarding family attitudes and behaviors are examined, the specific effects of parental school mobilization are confirmed.

## KEYWORDS

social background; school performance; public school; school mobilization of families.

## ***ESCOLHA DO ESTABELECIMENTO DE ENSINO, MOBILIZAÇÃO FAMILIAR E DESEMPENHO ESCOLAR***

### **RESUMO**

Este artigo discute resultados de uma pesquisa cuja ambição é aprofundar a compreensão da influência da família no desempenho escolar dos filhos. São analisadas 33 entrevistas com famílias de alunos do ensino fundamental, da rede pública de Belo Horizonte, MG, considerando situações de melhor e de pior desempenho desses alunos, bem como o perfil do estabelecimento de ensino frequentado, quanto aos resultados na Prova Brasil. Tal análise permite extrair dois tipos de conclusões. Por um lado, ressalta-se o peso das condições objetivas sobre o desempenho escolar. Por outro lado, quando se focalizam as diferenças secundárias, relacionadas a atitudes e comportamentos familiares, confirmam-se os efeitos específicos da mobilização escolar parental.

### **PALAVRAS-CHAVE**

origem social; desempenho escolar; escola pública; mobilização escolar familiar.

## ***ELECCIÓN DEL ESTABLECIMIENTO DE ENSEÑANZA, MOVILIZACIÓN FAMILIAR Y DESEMPEÑO ESCOLAR***

### **RESUMEN**

Este artículo discute los resultados de una investigación que ambiciona profundizar y entender la influencia de la familia en el desempeño escolar de los niños. Se analizan 33 entrevistas con familias de alumnos de la enseñanza fundamental, de la red pública de Belo Horizonte, teniendo en cuenta situaciones relacionadas al mejor y al peor desempeño de esos alumnos, así como el perfil del establecimiento de enseñanza frecuentado, en cuanto a los resultados en la Prueba Brasil. Tal análisis permite extraer dos tipos de conclusiones. Por un lado, se resalta el peso de las condiciones objetivas sobre el desempeño escolar. Por otro lado, cuando se focalizan las diferencias secundarias, relacionadas a aptitudes y comportamientos familiares, se confirman los efectos específicos de la movilización escolar parental.

### **PALABRAS CLAVE**

origen social; desempeño escolar; escuela pública; movilización escolar familiar.

## INTRODUCTION

School performance<sup>1</sup> of basic education students is currently a problem that goes beyond the frontiers of schools and families. It is discussed by the media, in the political and academic realms and by the business world. With the democratization of school access and the extension of mandatory schooling, attention has turned to the results of the schooling process, especially the learning of the basic abilities and competencies expected of students.

School learning is a multidimensional process involving not only factors related to the school and the individual, but also variables beyond the school related to the students' social origin and position, and that of their families.<sup>2</sup> These factors are prime influences, as has been broadly shown by studies from throughout the world (Barbosa, 2011; Coleman et al., 1966; Forquin, 1995).

But how does social origin influence learning and, consequently, students' school performance? Answering this question requires considering the different dimensions of this influence, as indicated by the sociology of education. The first studies in this field affirmed a need to consider the relations between students' school results and the morphologic and socioeconomic characteristics of their families, including income and parental schooling. The broader cultural influence of the family should be considered, as summarized in the concept of "cultural capital" introduced by Pierre Bourdieu in the 1960s (Bourdieu, 1998; Nogueira; Nogueira, 2009). It is also important to understand families' strategies regarding their children's schooling, as well as the dynamics and processes of family socialization, analyzing how these elements help to shape different school trajectories - as proposed since the 1980s by the "sociology of family-school relations" (Lareau, 1987; Lahire, 1997; Nogueira; Romanelli; Zago, 2000; Thin, 2006; Viana, 2007).

More recent studies have indicated the importance of also considering the place where families live and differences in the structure and dynamics of the school systems and schools themselves. In the Brazilian case, there is a rigid hierarchy of prestige and quality between private and public education, and even within each of these systems, which creates different educational opportunities for families. Faced by this scenario, it is relevant to study the process of school choice, even among users of public institutions (Alves, 2010; Costa, 2008; Costa; Koslinski, 2009; Resende; Nogueira; Nogueira, 2011).

Considering the complexity of the relation between social origin and school performance, this article discusses the results of a research program that sought to deepen, from a multidimensional perspective, the understanding of family influence in children's school performance. We adopted a research style that would allow a comparative analysis of the situation of the best and worst performances

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1 When using the expression "school performance" we refer to the students performance in school evaluations and proficiency tests that aim to check abilities and cognitive competencies related to curricular contents.

2 Other sources of influence are: the media, religious and political groups, peer groups, etc.

in fundamental educational<sup>3</sup>, considering the characteristics of each family and student individually, as well as the profile of the school they attended. This methodological design allowed the combination of quantitative data (proficiency grades in standardized tests and data from questionnaires issued to families) and qualitative ones (obtained through interviews).

The first phase was a survey that used a questionnaire to interview members of 299 families whose children participated in the Projeto Geres<sup>4</sup> and entered basic [elementary] school in 2005 in public or private schools in Belo Horizonte. The questionnaire sought to identify different aspects in the structure and dynamic of the family that could influence children's school performance. This influence was investigated, during this phase, by analyzing the association between responses to the questionnaire and the students' proficiency in the exams of Portuguese and mathematics issued by the Projeto Geres.

To select the sample of 299 students from the Geres population in Belo Horizonte (a total of 4,611 students) we used as a criterion the type of school they attended. Then, we maintained the proportion of the number of students among students in four groups: 1) those in private schools; 2) those in public federal schools; 3) those in state and municipal schools with outstanding results in Prova Brasil,<sup>5</sup> which we call "distinguished schools" 4) and those in other state and municipal schools, which we designate as "common."<sup>6</sup>

This sample stratification sought to contemplate families that, under similar socioeconomic conditions,<sup>7</sup> made different choices regarding their children's schooling. Those choices were considered to be indicators of the level of a families' school mobilization. The hypothesis was that those in groups 1 and 2 (private and

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3 Translator's note: in Brazil, fundamental school is mandatory, lasting 9 years and comprising children from 6 to 14 years old.

4 The Projeto Geres – Estudo Longitudinal da Geração Escolar 2005 [Longitudinal Study of a School Generation] was an inter-institutional study that followed the school performance of some 21,000 elementary school students in five Brazilian cities from 2005 to 2008, by applying five waves of tests of Portuguese and mathematics – the first in the beginning of 2005, when students were in their first year of fundamental school, and the others in the end of the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 4<sup>th</sup> years. For more information on Projeto Geres, see Franco, Brooke, Alves (2008).

5 This group corresponds to schools that participate in Projeto Geres that are in the upper quintile of performance in "Prova Brasil" 2005 – an evaluation of school achievement conducted by INEP/MEC (the Ministry of Education) with students in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> years of fundamental school.

6 The sample stratification by school type was inspired by studies such as Alves (2010).

7 To select the sample we excluded from Geres the families that belong to the top socioeconomic quintile. The aim was to have a relatively homogeneous group, from this perspective, to examine the secondary differences among the families, regarding their relation with their children's schooling. It is important to note that the Geres sample in Belo Horizonte has not included any of the elite private schools. Thus, students and families with a higher socioeconomic level were previously excluded. Thereby, our sample was basically a group of 299 families from lower classes and/or lower fractions of the middle classes (only thirteen fathers and one mother had a university diploma at the time of the questionnaire.)

federal schools) would be more mobilized. The first would be families that, despite a relatively low socioeconomic profile, invested in private education. The second were families that sought a distinctive type of school (affiliated to a university), normally far from home and that has a special selection process: a drawing. Families in group 3 (state and municipal schools with good results in Prova Brasil) would be second in terms of mobilization. We supposed, from previous knowledge of this practice, that part of them would have intentionally “circumvented” the school registration<sup>8</sup> and had deliberately chosen a school with better performance. Finally, the families with children in common state and municipal schools (group 4) would be less mobilized, since they had apparently more passively followed the regulations for school registration.<sup>9</sup>

In the second phase of the research we interviewed family members from each group, to qualitatively deepen the data previously obtained in the questionnaires. The families were selected for the interviews considering contrasting performances in the Geres exams. Therefore, in each of the four groups mentioned (composed according to the type of school) two subgroups were selected: one with 10 families whose children had the best performances in the Portuguese and math tests and another with families whose children had the worst performance.<sup>10</sup> We thus had eight subgroups, with 10 families each, which were contacted for the interviews.

In this text, we are only going to discuss the four subgroups of families whose children were enrolled in distinguished and common state and municipal schools. Although 10 families from each group were selected, it was not possible to interview all of them, even when using a reserve sample, due mainly to difficulties in establishing contacts.<sup>11</sup> The following chart presents the number of interviews actually made with the four subgroups - 33 in total - which were used as a basis for this article.

8 The school registration is an official process for placing students within the Minas Gerais State system and the Belo Horizonte municipal system. The main criteria is the proximity of the school to the student's house, based on a proof of address presented by the family.

9 Sociological literature has been using the acceptance or refusal of the designated school, as indicators of, respectively, an active or passive choice by the families (Gissot, Héran; Manon, 1994; Héran, 1996). Our initial hypothesis was based on this literature. The results of the study suggest, however, the need to be more cautious with this distinction.

10 In the case of the best performing students in distinguished schools, following the hypothesis that the distance from house to school could be considered as an indicator of family mobilization (Alves, 2010), we selected only those that, besides their performance, lived 1,000 meters or more from the school.

11 We had the addresses and telephone numbers of the families in the year of the questionnaire application (2007). The interviews were conducted in 2011 and 2012. It is worth mentioning that the interregnum between the application of the questionnaire and the interviews was taken into consideration in the interview questions, to reconstruct the entire schooling trajectory until that moment, thus contemplating school transfers, changes in family monitoring, the children's performance, choices made, and life circumstances in different moments of their trajectories.

**Chart 1 – Families interviewed according to sample subgroups**

Subgroup	Number of families interviewed
State and municipal schools distinguished in Prova Brasil- students with the best performances	08
State and municipal schools distinguished in Prova Brasil –students with the worst performances	07
Common state and municipal schools - students with the best performances	10
Common state and municipal schools - students with the worst performances	08

Source: research data. Prepared by the authors.

In this text we use a comparative perspective among the four subgroups of students/families. Our specific objective is to better understand the relations between children's school performance, family choices and family mobilization. To do so, we present four topics organized around the following questions: 1) How can the school performance of the students in the four subgroups be characterized?; 2) How can the families in the four subgroups, be characterized socioeconomically?; 3) How did the families in the four subgroups choose the schools? ; 4) How can the families' mobilization regarding their children's education be characterized beyond the choice of school, that is in everyday life?

## SCHOOL PERFORMANCE IN THE FOUR SUBGROUPS

The comparative perspective used in this article, considering the study design presented in the introduction, allows simultaneously reflecting on the possible differences among types of public schools and on differences between the student groups (those with the best and worst performances) inside schools.

A first observation is that the contrast between common and distinguished public schools, initially made based on the results of the Prova Brasil test, was consistent with the students' results on the Geres' exams. As made clear by Chart 2, in almost all the test waves, the proficiency of the best performing students from distinguished schools was superior to their peers in common schools; the same can be observed when comparing the worst performing students in both types of schools. We are not going to discuss in this text the reasons why students from these two types of schools, belonging to the same school system, have such different performances. There may be differences related to the specific location of the schools, intra-school factors (teacher profiles, the pedagogical project used, type of administration, etc.) and/or significant differences in the socioeconomic profiles of the users. Whatever the reason may be, the fact is that there are two relatively contrasting realities in the results of the schools. It is important to highlight that

this contrast is not only captured by the data from the Prova Brasil and Projeto Geres. It is also present in parents' discourse, and even that of the students' about the schools. The families of distinguished schools seem to be aware in some way that their children are in a relatively privileged school within the public system.

A second important observation is that the distinction between the students with the best and worst performances in each type of school was more significant than that observed between types of school. As can be seen in Chart 2, the proficiency differences between the subgroup with the best and the one with the worst results in the Geres tests are extremely significant, in both the distinguished schools and in the common ones. These differences are consistent with the evaluations that parents made of their children's performance and also with more objective data about their school trajectories, such as the whether students had to repeat a grade.

In summary, it is possible to say that the research methodology made it possible to approach four relatively different schooling experiences in municipal and state systems in Belo Horizonte. The students with the best performances in the distinguished schools, except for one, are in the right grade for their age. Moreover, according to their parents, they have good grades in school and are considered well behaved and dedicated students. Similarly, the students with the best performances in common schools have never failed a year and are described by their parents as good students, or, at least, average ones. The parents often said that the teachers consider their children to be good students. Apart from these similarities, there seem to be some important differences among them. The best students from distinguished schools are described more emphatically, by their parents as good students. Their descriptions indicate: "only good grades"; "above average"; "he aces his monthly tests"; "he has never failed a class"; "she has always been a good student." On the other hand the parents of the best students in common schools are generally more cautious about characterizing their children's performance. Half of them say that their children have had "ups and downs" during their school trajectory (low grades, periods with low motivation, little dedication to school, etc.). The results reached by both subgroups in the Geres tests (Chart 2) also suggest that there is a consistent and persistent difference between their performance levels. The students from distinguished schools had better performances in practically all test waves, except the third wave of mathematics.

Among the students with lower results in distinguished schools, most are not in the expected grade for their age, having been left back at least once, and two of them had repeated grades twice. Generally, parents' interviews suggest that students in this subgroup have poor performance in school and in some cases, suffer from disinterest and disciplinary problems. We can observe in Geres tests that these students have much lower results than those of the best students at both the better and common schools. However, their performances suggest a relatively better situation than that of the students with the worst performances in common schools. In this last subgroup, all eight students were not in the grade expected, having been left back at least once. Three of them had two failures each. In general,

parents of this subgroup report a situation of poor school *performance*, describing problems of discipline, lack of interest, and learning difficulties.

We therefore have a significant contrast between the four subgroups of students and families selected. The point is to investigate how and to what extent it would be possible to understand these different realities when considering family aspects.

**Chart 2: Students' proficiency average in Geres tests, per group**

Type of school	Subgroup	Proficiency average on the Geres tests							
		Portuguese				Mathematics			
Distinguished State or municipal	Best performances	132,38	148,14	167,48	177,45	119,18	146,61	161,27	177,64
	Worst performances	79,38	102,03	112,78	123,23	78,05	108,16	102,87	133,86
Common state or municipal	Best performances	124,57	138,77	160,39	168,19	117,93	140,61	162,87	173,18
	Worst performances	71,59	97,08	98,41	107,06	71,32	96,04	90,73	100,62

Source: research data. Prepared by the authors.

## SOCIOECONOMIC PROFILE OF THE FOUR SUBGROUPS

As explained in the introduction, since the quantitative or survey phase of the study, we sought to select families with a relatively homogeneous socioeconomic profile, whose children studied in different types of schools. In doing so, we aimed to identify families that, regardless of their socioeconomic similarities, had different attitudes towards their children's schooling.

**Chart 3: Socioeconomic level (SEL) of the analyzed groups**

SUBGROUPS ANALYZED	SEL (average)
Best performance in distinguished municipal and state schools	-0,03
Worst performance in distinguished municipal and state schools	-0,30
Best performance in common municipal and state schools	-0,10
Worst performance in common municipal and state schools	-0,43

Source: Research data. Prepared by the authors.

As discussed in previous works (Resende, Nogueira; Nogueira, 2011), the analysis of the survey results are in a way surprising. It was clear that even in our sample population, which was relatively homogeneous in macro social terms, there was still a close relation between the socioeconomic and demographic profile of the families and the type of school the children attended. It is important to highlight that, in macro social terms, the students at state and municipal schools in the survey had parents with low levels of schooling (mostly having fundamental schooling complete or incomplete), who had low-skilled and low income jobs, and

thus have profile corresponding to the lower classes. However, when contrasting some socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of both groups found in the survey (students from distinguished and common schools), we found significant differences, always in favor of the families with students in the distinguished schools. For example, while 36.2% of mothers in families with children at distinguished schools had finished high school, the rate was only 18.8% among mothers of children in the common schools. While 19.2% of children in distinguished schools had 3 siblings or more, this index was 31.7% for children in the common schools.

These findings alerted us to the fact that part of the performance differences (Chart 2) found among the four selected subgroups in the qualitative phase of the research may be explained by objective characteristics of the families. Considering the average Socioeconomic Level (SEL)<sup>12</sup> of the families interviewed in the qualitative phase (Chart 3) we can see that there are significant differences among the four subgroups. It is also possible to observe that the differences within each type of school (distinguished and common), between students with the best and the worst performances, are significantly more important than those found when comparing students with the highest performance between the two types of school, or when comparing those with the worst performance between the same schools. The different socioeconomic level between the students with the best and worst performances in distinguished schools reaches 0.27 points. Among those with the best and the worst performances in common schools, the difference reaches 0.33 points. On the other hand, when comparing the socioeconomic level of the best students in distinguished schools with the best students in common schools, the difference is only 0.7 points. The same is true for the difference between the students with the worst performance in distinguished schools and their peers in common schools, which is only 0.13 points. Therefore, there is a homology among the identified socioeconomic differences when comparing the four subgroups and the performance differences, identified in the previous item (Chart 2 and 3).

This all suggests, therefore, that part of the performance differences among the four subgroups can be explained by objective differences among them. The observations made during the interviews reinforce this hypothesis. There are no radical differences among the groups, but there are substantial distinctions. The interviews allowed noticing, important variations among the subgroups on a micro-sociological scale, which shape advantages and disadvantages that the aggregated data cannot capture (Collins, 2000). For instance, having a stable job as a public worker, being a manual worker with an employment contract, or doing small temporary jobs are different professional situations that have a clear impact on family living conditions. Having finished high school at the right age, having completed after some failures or after many years outside school, in a school for

12 When selecting the sample, we already had a SEL measure built by Projeto GERES, which grouped variables related to income, occupation, and parental schooling. In the sample of 299 families, the index varies from -1,4 to 0,6, the average was -0,1.

youths and adults, represent different experiences of the same level of schooling, which can be decisive when it comes to the influence over the children.

It was also possible to notice, in general terms, that these variations follow a certain gradation, they seem to improve as we go from one subgroup of families to another, in the ensuing order: students with the worst performance in common schools; students with the worst performance in distinguished schools; students with the best performance in common schools; and students with the best performance in distinguished schools. This *continuum* can be established by observing different elements: parents' schooling level; parents' type of profession and professional situation (work that is more or less); size and composition of families; living conditions; family members with chronic health problems, alcohol and/or drug addiction, or even members involved in criminal activities. The interviews allowed perceiving how all these elements influenced the children's schooling process.

## SCHOOL CHOICE

As previously mentioned, the choice of school by the family was an important topic in the research, considering the hypothesis that the type of school attended could be an indicator of more or less parental mobilization regarding their children's schooling. Thus, it was vital that the interview collect data that could confirm or refute this hypothesis by asking questions such as: Why did your child begin the first grade at school X? Was it indicated by the registry? How did you respond to the indication? Did you choose the school? How? Did you consider enrollment in a private school? And in situations after changing schools (if this occurred), what were the choices and how were they made? In this part of the article we will synthesize the results of this topic, considering each subgroup of interviewed families.

### MUNICIPAL AND STATE SCHOOLS DISTINGUISHED IN THE PROVA BRASIL

The initial hypothesis was that we would find in this group of schools parents that were relatively more mobilized towards their children's schooling, who had actively sought better quality schools within the state and municipal systems, perhaps having bypassed the school registry to secure enrollment. The interviews did find a certain level of family mobilization in relation to school choice, which, however, did not always lead to disrespecting the registry and is not always associated to good student performance. We will detail this scenario by comparing the subgroups of students with the best and worst performances.

#### *Students with the best performance in distinguished schools*

In this subgroup, five of the eight interviewees did not follow the school registry and enrolled their children in the school that they considered the best in their region.<sup>13</sup> In most cases, the main criteria was the organization of the school;

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13 One of the mothers admitted using the address of an aunt to get a place in the desired school. In the case of three families, it was not clear, through the interview, how they got a place that was not allocated by the registry. A fifth family received the indication

closer schools were rejected if they were considered “to lack discipline,” or, in the words of an interviewee, to be “a mess” where “anyone can enter.” In this context, we observed an “avoidance strategy” (Nogueira, 1998) in relation to this school and the targeting of another, considered to be better. This school evaluation was based on the indication of professionals, friends, and relatives, or because the school’s prestige was known to the interested parents.

Three families in this subgroup accepted the school registry, but evaluated the school indicated and concluded that it was good for their children. In general, these families tried to learn about the school – those who did not know it before – and considered aspects such as organization, attention given to students, and the type of public served. They were schools with good reputations in their neighborhoods, which seems to have helped the parents’ decision.

Therefore, we concluded that all eight families were mobilized, to different degrees, to enroll their children in a quality school, which is certainly an important element in the configuration of the factors that explain good performances on the Geres tests. Two fundamental conditions for this mobilization, however, must be highlighted. First, it happens within the parameters of “location x quality” viable to this group. We are dealing with families that do not have the material conditions to afford the costs of a distant school, nor the symbolic conditions to evaluate quality, which would require a deep knowledge of the schooling system and of the different pedagogical options. Secondly, this mobilization was, in a way, favored by the existence in their regions of public schools with good results. Thus, they are not families who researched a broad array of schools and choose among them, but parents who, knowing about a better quality school a reasonable distance from their homes,<sup>14</sup> made an effort to enroll their students there. This finding reinforces the importance of considering, in the analysis of school choice and educational inequalities, the “geography of opportunities” (Alves; Lange; Bonamino, 2010; Koslinski; Alves, 2012), which suggests that the geographical context influences the objective opportunities available, as well as the information they have access to and their perceptions and aspirations regarding those opportunities. In this case, the “geography of opportunities” seems to favor this subgroup of families.

#### *Students with the worst performance in distinguished schools*

In this subgroup, five mothers (of seven) said that they did not follow the school registry, and looked for a school that they considered to be better in the area they live. Three of them admitted bypassing the registry by using the address of relatives or acquaintances. Two others two used strategies such as visiting the Secretariat of Education and talking with professionals from the desired school to get a place, despite the registry indication. The other two families in the subgroup followed the registry since it met their expectations: the mothers said they would

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of a school that was not yet open, then looked for another, which was considered very good at the time, to enroll their daughter.

14 Related to the notion of “best distance” (Alves, 2010).

have not accepted another indication, since the school their children attend is the best in the region. Generally, the seven mothers consider in their evaluation the organization of the school and how demanding it is; one mother mentioned that the school has received awards for its performance.

Thus, we can see that, for this subgroup, the hypothesis of a relation between the type of school and family mobilization is confirmed: they are families that, in their realm of possibilities, which restrict them to public schools, actively searched for a higher quality school to give better educational opportunities to their children. The observations made in the previous item are also true for these families in regard to the notion of “best distance” of a distinguished school in the region of residence. However, in the case of this subgroup, this mobilization is not associated with a good performance by their children, as in the previous group. Other factors – related to the school environment, the family or the individual – should be considered to explain the poor school results of these students, as indicated by the Geres tests and by the statements from family members in the interviews.

#### “COMMON” STATE AND MUNICIPAL SCHOOLS

For this group of schools, the initial assumption was that the families, in general, had passively accepted the indication of the school registry, without questioning, which would indicate a more fragile mobilization. The results led us to revise this hypothesis, as we will explain.

##### *Students with the best performance in “common” schools*

In this subgroup, an interesting result of the research, which contradicted the initial hypothesis, was the identification of a certain parental mobilization regarding school choice. In eight of the ten families, the interviewees reported an effort to evaluate the available school possibilities, even if this “choice” meant, in certain cases, accepting the school indicated by the registry. This evaluation and choice involved practices such as: visits to the school, conversations with other families and school professionals, visits to the regional education office to check information about the school indicated by the registry and attempts to change schools. Two families had even enrolled their children in more distant schools, considered to be better (a private one downtown and a farther public school), but had to transfer later for lack of money and means to transport the children.

The analysis of these eight cases indicate that being enrolled in a school defined as “common,” according to our criteria, is not a sufficient indication that there was no active work to select a school.<sup>15</sup> In this respect, two hypotheses can be raised. One is, again, related to the “geography of opportunities”. Maybe there was

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15 The other two families in this subgroup adopted an attitude that seems to be indeed passive regarding their children's school choice. In one of the cases, the economic conditions were identified by the mother as determinant. In another case, the parents, shop owners, apparently had better financial conditions, but the daughter's participation in the family business seemed to be the priority. The girl studied in the school indicated by the registry, which the mother recognized as “kind of weak.”

no school in the region that distinguished itself in the Prova Brasil. So, although relatively mobilized regarding the choice, these families were deprived of the opportunity to enroll their children in these schools.

A second hypothesis - considering the strong hierarchy in the Brazilian educational system, even among public institutions (Costa, 2008) - is that among those schools that we are calling "common," based on their performance in the Prova Brasil, there are still differences in their organization and educational quality. It may be that these families opted for a certain school that has a relative quality in the area they live, options that in association with other factors contributed to the relatively higher performance of their children, when compared to their peers in the same type of school and to students with the worst performances in distinguished public schools.

The data collected from a group of parents of students with better performance in common schools have also led us to relativize the assumption, well established in the literature about school choice (Nogueira, 1998; Resende; Nogueira; Nogueira, 2011), that the choices made by low income classes follow basically practical reasons: proximity to home, having siblings studying in the school and others. In eight of the ten cases studied, besides considering practical factors, discipline and safety at each school, the parents made a more detailed analysis of elements internal to the schools' pedagogical processes. They considered, to some degree: how demanding the school is, failure policies, teachers and principals engagement and others. They have even compared municipal and state systems in terms of pedagogical policies.

#### *Students with the worst performance in "common" schools*

In this subgroup, closer to what our initial hypothesis predicted, we found the highest number of families that, having enrolled their children in the schools indicated by the registry, did not undertake concrete practices of school choice and evaluation. Nevertheless, even in these cases it seems unfair to oppose the adjectives "passive" and "active," as if following the registry meant a total passivity or inaction. There was usually some concern about evaluating the school. In this subgroup, however, we could observe that the objective conditions to make a transfer, as well as subjective conditions to make an evaluation (specifically, low information capital) are highly limiting factors. In the cases in which the registry was followed more strictly, these conditions appeared to be imperative. And, in all cases, we observed that the location/proximity to the school is a fundamental criteria - normally the first one cited - given the families' living conditions. Even when more concrete selection procedures were used, the choice is made from among the few possibilities determined by the location.

This was the case of two families in this subgroup that, before enrolling their children, visited the closer schools and talked with different people in the neighborhood to evaluate the available options. Three other mothers accepted the school registry and highlighted the proximity of the school as a criterion, but affirmed that the schools had good indicators of quality, although did not exhibit strategies to search for further information on the topic. Finally, only one mother

interviewed recognized that the school was chosen because it was closer, even though she knew that “the education was not good.”<sup>16</sup>

We should highlight that, in this subgroup of families, besides the greater importance given to the criteria “proximity,” the interviews made clear that when parents prioritize quality in school choice, or when evaluating the quality of the school in which their children study, this is based on more visible aspects, such as material resources, school organization, discipline, safety, care for the children, and communication with families, differently from what we observed in the group with the better performance children. Strictly pedagogical aspects were mentioned in only one interview, when comparing the contents in her child’s school and the ones in the schools’ of relatives and acquaintances.

## FAMILY SCHOOL MOBILIZATION IN EVERYDAY LIFE

If school choice by families is a central aspect in understanding the family mobilization, in this section this topic will be approached from the perspective of processes internal to the families’ everyday lives. During the interview we tried to identify the types of follow-up and monitoring they made of their children’s schooling, and during their trajectory, as well as the problems faced in doing so. We understand by “family school mobilization,” in a sociological perspective, a collection of practices and attitudes focused on a successful schooling for their kids.

These practices and attitudes refer to practical interventions ( systematic control of school activities, school choice and paths, referral to tutoring courses and extra-curricular ones, attendance of pedagogical meetings and PTAs, etc.) as well as moral and emotional support (conversations about the school, support in difficult times)”. (Viana, 2007, p. 47)

The results on school mobilization will now be presented for each of the family subgroups.

## MUNICIPAL AND STATE SCHOOL DISTINGUISHED IN THE PROVA BRASIL

We assumed at the beginning of the study that families with children in outstanding schools would also be more mobilized in relation to everyday practices that involved schooling and that this mobilization would positively influence school results. However, this phenomenon was more complex.

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16 This mother affirms that she was depressed at the time and did not have the energy to “climb uphill” to take her daughter to another school. At the time of the interview, the girl was in another school (by request of the previous one), which the mother qualified as “terrible,” according to her, it was nicknamed “Carandiru” [a notorious Brazilian prison] by the community. This is, therefore, a situation that can be considered as passive towards the school registry. It is worth mentioning that, in another case in this subgroup, the enrollment was obtained after transfer from the interior, therefore outside the period of the normal school registration

*Students with the best performance in distinguished schools*

We found that parents in this subgroup are present in the schooling of their children, but this presence should be relativized and qualified concerning its form, degree and nature.

We identified in this subgroup the following forms of parental mobilization: asking help from outside the family, especially from people in religious groups in which they participate; attendance of school meetings, when asked, mainly to receive student report cards; presence at the school when there are problems with their children, which was not common in this group; regular checking of children's grades and signing of their tests.

In relation to school tasks, we mostly noticed , accompaniment by the provision of moral support and general oversight. Thus, most parents asked their children questions such as: do you have homework? Have you done it? What about the workbook? What part of the book are you studying? According to the parents' statements, there was no need for more direct help with homework. The supposition is that the children had incorporated, over their school trajectories, the necessity (and the desire, in certain cases) to do their homework.

The two exceptions to this support indicate oppositions: a) Gilson,<sup>17</sup> whose mother is graduated in pedagogy, stands out due to a rigorous and continuous monitoring of his school activities, and b) Luis Henrique, whose family, on the contrary, seems to have gone through a process of "school demobilization" during his trajectory. Initially the mother closely accompanied her son, but lately there is a relation of distrust and distance towards the school, due do the constant complaints of the teachers regarding her son's behavior and performance.

*Students with the worst performance in distinguished schools*

The observations in this group revealed that poor school performance does not necessarily express a low family mobilization. It was possible to identify practices of accompaniment that are ambiguous forms of school mobilization.

Jonas' parents, for instance, adopted significant practices towards his schooling, especially at difficult moments: transferring him to a private school when he began to have difficulties in a public school; sending him for psychological treatment; paying for private tutoring to help him with homework and accompanying his school tasks.

Other data from this subgroup also point to other forms of family mobilization: a close monitoring, with the teachers, by a mother who works in the same school where the son studies – "don't let him loose his attention" urges this mother; participation in all the school meetings as well as occasional visits to the school on their own; sending messages to the teachers; overseeing homework; one mother took her son to a physician, a psychologist and a psychopedagogy professional; occasional private classes, etc.

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17 The names of all subjects were substituted by fictional ones.

However, two situations of less mobilization were identified in this subgroup. In one of them, we can clearly observe a tension and dissonance with school values, shown by a student's stepfather, Rogério, who said that he did not like to study and that his stepson was the same. Moreover, he seemed to believe it to be normal that children Rogério's age do not like to study and prefer to play. To control this, he offers many presents and access to several consumer goods (electronic cars, children's motorbikes, sophisticated videogames, etc.). The monitoring of the boy's school life, by the mother and stepfather, seems to be reduced. They only check the report card every three months; they do not check his notebooks for homework, since they consider this to be the child's responsibility, and they do not go to the school.

In another situation Walter's mother considers herself unable to help her son due to her low schooling and long work hours:

To follow him, first I don't...they know that I don't know things. I wake up at 4:30 in the morning, I'll tell you something, to tell you the truth, I arrive home tired, really tired. I also don't know how to teach them, I think it's useless. Teaching what I don't know? When he was smaller he asked me to teach them, but "How am I going to teach what I don't know?" [laughs].

Yet, the fact she is not supervising it does not necessarily mean she is not interested in her son's schooling. This is clear, for instance, by the fact that, although Walter wanted to study at night so he could work during the day, his mother did not allow him, since she believes that the school was not good enough and that working could compromise his school performance.

#### "COMMON" STATE AND MUNICIPAL SCHOOLS

The research hypothesis for the subgroup of families whose children are enrolled in common schools was that they would be less mobilized in relation to school, in their everyday life and, therefore, their children would tend to have a worse school performance. The results here also indicate a more complex reality, as detailed below.

##### *Students with the best performances in "common" schools*

Nine of the ten families in this subgroup seem mobilized in relation to their children's schooling. It is possible, however, to notice significant differences in how this mobilization takes place. Some mothers describe direct participation in their children's school tasks, as well as a constant checking of their notebooks, and even an effort to evaluate their children's level of learning. Others, however, only check their children's attendance and grades. It is interesting to note that in at least five out of nine cases of higher investment, the parents seek the help of more educated members of the extended family or even neighbors. In one of the cases, the intense participation of the grandmother was noteworthy, she had previously worked in a school cafeteria.

In this subgroup there is also a family that has a small shop that is a bit different from the rest. In this family, the father, especially, seems to be against a

greater investment in schooling. The mother supports this perspective. For example, he does not encourage searching for a better school for their daughter, despite the fact that the mother has a bad evaluation of the school and they have a financial condition that would allow her to transfer to a more distant public school or even to a private one. In this case, we noticed a valorization of an early entrance into the job market over an investment in education.

#### *Students with the worst performances in “common” schools*

In relation to the students with the worst performance in common school, we identified two types of family context, both anchored in precarious living conditions (material, cultural, and health related). One of them effectively hampers any “family school mobilization” practices; the other shows that, when these practices occur, their effectiveness is significantly limited.

Thus, some families in this subgroup were less mobilized, whether in relation to choosing a school, in the monitoring of school activities at home, or in their presence at school when not called. These cases clearly involve situations of material instability and/or limited access to culture assets or even physical or psychological problems that prevent parents from paying attention to children’s school life, or even having that as an objective.

The first type of family context, marked mainly by material limitations, is evident in the testimony of Gabriela’s mother. When asked if she followed her daughter’s homework, when Gabriela was younger, she said:

It was difficult [to follow] because I was always looking for what to eat, even when doing the treatment [The mother was undergoing a serious health treatment, the father was an alcoholic, he had a fall and had fainting crises]. Her father didn’t help, so I did the laundry, cleaned [working at other people’s houses] so I forgot about her, her studies.

This mother also complained: “when we have to think if we will have something to eat at night, we can’t really think about homework”.

Physical and psychological health issues and economic instability were also present in other cases. Fabiola’s father is a *crack* addict, which involves the family in extremely turbulent situations; the family’s material conditions are also very precarious; the mother has psychiatric problems and is illiterate. In Monica’s case, although the material conditions were less precarious, the mother’s health problems (depression) seemed to undermine a more effective schooling mobilization.

In another type of family context in this subgroup, it was possible to identify some level of school mobilization, in the following situations: hiring someone to help with homework, participation in school meetings; accompaniment at home, controlling notebooks - although this did not lead to the son’s systematic dedication; liberation from household chores, to focus on school tasks; “analysis” of exams which the daughter failed, checking that they were redone; seeking remedial classes; requesting meetings at school, even if not called; encouragement to study, highlighting the importance of finishing, at least high school. It is important to

highlight, however, that these mobilization strategies were not always systematic, and in general were not effective for improving children's school performance.

## FINAL REMARKS

The investigative work presented in this article helps provide a more complex sociological understanding of the relations between social origin and school performance. The results reinforce the need for a multidimensional view of the processes that construct school inequality, going beyond one-dimensional explanations in favor of an approach that is more focused on the interactions among various factors. If, on one hand, these results reveal the weight of objective conditions on schooling, on the other, they also highlight the importance of more carefully considering the attitudes and practical behaviors of the families and the children themselves.

As discussed throughout the text, the research depicts the weight of objective conditions on the schooling process. Even after selecting a more homogeneous socioeconomic sample, and restricted to families whose children attend municipal and state schools in low income neighborhoods of Belo Horizonte - thus excluding private schools and even public ones in richer areas of the city - the results show that the differences among families, considering their objective conditions, are still significant and strongly influence children's schooling.

As discussed in section 2, families with children in distinguished state and municipal schools have a more favorable situation, socioeconomically and demographically, than those in common public schools. The data also shows that the families not only have differentiated access to common or distinguished schools, depending on their social profile, but also that children's performance is strongly associated with socioeconomic level, or more broadly, to the families' objective conditions. Once more a strong correlation is evident, as classically established in the sociology of education, between social position or origin and access to valued educational goods. The distinction of this study is that it indicated more subtle levels of hierarchy in which this relation can be expressed.

The analysis of the interviews showed how the process of school choice by families is made to the extent of their possibilities, clearly delimited by socioeconomic conditions. The families, especially those in less favorable conditions, have to choose from the public schools close to their homes. In the few cases in which families have enrolled their children in more distant schools, the costs of transportation almost always proved to be untenable in the long run. Corroborating with what is already established in sociological literature, the capacity of choice is associated with families' informational capital. The perception of the importance given to the choice of school and the selection criteria used, more or less external to strictly pedagogical issues, are related to the level of parents' familiarity with the schooling systems. For example, this level was lower among parents of children with the worst performance in common schools.

The weight of different forms of capital also proved to be important in everyday schooling practices. As discussed throughout the text, many mothers

interviewed explicitly expressed their concrete difficulties, of a cultural nature (low schooling) or socioeconomic one (too much work, little time, and minimal objective conditions) in accompanying their children's schooling. Generally, the statements invite us to go beyond a simple discussion of family mobilization or the lack of it, propelling us to a more detailed investigation of the objective conditions of this mobilization. As one mother quoted above said, when one has to think about what the family will have to eat that day, it is difficult to think about homework.

If the data analyzed sheds light on the weight of objective conditions of schooling processes, it also highlights the importance of more carefully considering the attitudes and practical behaviors of families and children. As explained in the introduction, the main objective of our research, since its quantitative phase, was to investigate in a relatively homogeneous universe in socioeconomic terms, the weight of secondary differences, connected to families' attitudes and behaviors. The intention was to investigate families that, regardless of their socioeconomic similarity, presented different levels of school mobility. With this objective in mind, we stratified the sample by types of school. The central hypothesis was that the type of school chosen by families would be a good indicator of their degree of mobility.

The interviews analyzed in this article, related to families in distinguished and common state and municipal schools, show that the reality is more complex. First, the fact of having their children in common or distinguished schools does not necessarily mean that school choice can be considered as passive or active. Many parents whose children attend common schools actively evaluated the schools in their region (looking for information, conducting visits, etc.). Some of them even used practical strategies (bypassing the school registry, talking previously with the school administrators, asking for admission) to guarantee their children's enrollment in the desired school. Even among those who were not successful in this initial effort and ended up at a different school, it was possible to identify a continuous evaluation process and, in some cases, efforts to transfer the children to other schools.<sup>18</sup>

As expected, the parents whose children were in distinguished schools seemed more active (for instance, a higher proportion of them bypassed the school registry). In general, their efforts to evaluate the available schools and find a better school did not seem so different from that done by parents with children in a common school. Thus we cannot label the first as active and the second as passive. As discussed previously, the parents with children in distinguished schools may even have benefited from the existence of a school, relatively close to home, with good results in Prova Brasil, in which they could enroll their children, through different strategies, such as bypassing the registry. Comparatively, parents from common schools had a smaller range of choices.

A second finding that indicates the complexity of the phenomenon studied is the fact that we did not identify a direct and unequivocal relation between the level of mobilization in choosing the school and a more general parental mobilization in

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18 These initiatives were specially observed amongst parents of students with the best performances in common schools.

their children's schooling processes. It is clear that in most cases there is a certain agreement between parents' actions and attitudes when choosing the school and the way they relate everyday with their schooling. Once more, however, we have to be careful to not adopt a simplified understanding of reality. We saw cases in which parents made a great effort when choosing a school, even bypassing the registry, but did not demonstrate the same involvement in everyday schooling processes. The opposite was also true. This suggests that school choice may be a process with a certain autonomy in relation to other dimensions of the monitoring of children's schooling.

Finally, the data corroborates that the relations between performance and level of parental mobilization are not linear and clear (Diogo, 2012). We found some families that were mobilized around choosing a school, and involved in the daily monitoring of their children's education, but this did not result in good school performance. In most cases, we found an interference of economic and or health (including psychiatric) problems that affect the family. There were also specific learning problems, whose analyses go beyond the scope of this article. The research identified, on the other hand, opposite cases in which there were good performances despite an apparently limited mobilization by the families. Regarding these cases, one should remember that family mobilization towards their children's schooling is not always explicit. It can happen through indirect stimuli and support, which are hard to capture by the researcher according to Viana (2007), specific forms of parental presence in children's schooling.

It is also important to remember that families' practices and attitudes change throughout children's schooling trajectory and also depend on their performance. In this sense, many parents affirmed that they did not need to closely follow their children's schooling, either because they are relatively grown up and autonomous, or because they are excellent, competent students, who are responsible about their school tasks.

In summary, when aiming to simultaneously consider many dimensions of the problem, this article helps to clarify the complexity of the processes of social construction of school performance. On one hand, this is related to the objective social conditions of the families, which can have subtle variations even among families that are apparently similar from a macro sociological perspective. On the other hand, one cannot deny the specific effect of family mobilization towards school, be it in the moment of school choice or in the daily monitoring of schooling. In turn, this mobilization is not abstract, but occurs within a concrete relationship between a family, a child and a specific school, inserted in a school system and market, which are more or less apt to stimulate and bring to fruition the educational efforts of the families they serve. The challenge for researchers is to increasingly advance in the understanding of the interfaces among these several dimensions.

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