

Concealed selection in public schools: practices, processes and generating principles^I

Luciana Alves^{II}

Antônio Augusto Gomes Batista^{III}

Vanda Mendes Ribeiro^{IV}

Maurício Érnica^V

Abstract

In the area of studies concerning competitive interdependence relations between schools, this article presents the results of an exploratory investigation which sought to understand the processes and practices used by ordinary public schools – state and municipal ones – located in predominantly poor suburban areas and in the context of a mode of regulation that inhibits families from choosing a school, as well as schools from operating selection processes. The study also sought to understand the principles that guide these selection processes and practices. Using the snowball procedure, this qualitative study interviewed school secretaries in charge of enrolment. The analysis of data revealed the existence of two selection processes: (i) avoidance, which consists of denying registration and not accepting enrolments when applicants are evaluated as a supposed threat to discipline; and (2) concealed expulsion, when undesired students are invited to find another school due to conflicts and behavior problems. In both cases, the main generating principle of practices and processes is the pursuit of a disciplined school environment. Data indicate that such prejudices seem to overly penalize families of lower socio-economic and cultural levels who present dispositions that are more distant from school culture.

I- This study is part of a wider investigation coordinated by Maria Alice Setubal and Antônio Augusto Gomes Batista, and was supported by Fapesp and the Fundo de Pesquisa Educação para o Século XXI. It is a joint initiative of Fundação Tide Setubal and Cenpec, supported by Fundação Itaú Social and Unicef. The authors are Cenpec researchers.

II- Universidade de São Paulo, São Paulo, SP, Brasil.

Contact: luciana.alves@usp.br

III- Centro de Estudos e Pesquisas em Educação, Cultura e Ação Comunitária (Cenpec), São Paulo, SP, Brasil.

Contact: antonio.batista@cenpec.org.br

IV- 1. Centro de Estudos e Pesquisas em Educação, Cultura e Ação Comunitária (Cenpec), São Paulo, SP, Brasil.

2. Universidade Cidade de São Paulo (Unicid), São Paulo, SP, Brasil.

Contact: vanda.ribeiro@cenpec.org.br

V- Universidade Estadual de Campinas, Campinas, SP, Brasil .

Contact: ernica@unicamp.br

Keywords

Student selection – Expulsion – Competitive interdependence relations between schools – Competition between schools.

Seleção velada em escolas públicas: práticas, processos e princípios geradores

Luciana Alves^{II}

Antônio Augusto Gomes Batista^{III}

Vanda Mendes Ribeiro^V

Maurício Érnica^V

Resumo

No quadro dos estudos a respeito das relações de interdependência competitiva entre escolas, este artigo apresenta os resultados de uma investigação de natureza exploratória cujos objetivos foram apreender processos e práticas utilizados por escolas comuns públicas – estaduais e municipais –, localizadas em regiões predominantemente periféricas e no contexto de um modo de regulação que inibe tanto a escolha de estabelecimentos de ensino pelas famílias como processos de seleção pelas escolas. A pesquisa buscou ainda apreender os princípios que orientam esses processos e práticas de seleção. Utilizando o procedimento de bola de neve, este estudo, de natureza qualitativa, entrevistou secretários de estabelecimentos de ensino encarregados de realizar a matrícula. A análise dos dados revelou a existência de dois processos de seleção: (i) o evitamento, concretizado pela negação de cadastro e pela não aceitação de matrículas quando os solicitantes são avaliados como supostas ameaças à disciplina; (2) e a expulsão velada, quando alunos indesejados são convidados a buscarem outro estabelecimento, devido a conflitos e problemas de comportamento. Nos dois casos, o princípio gerador das práticas e processos reside na busca de assegurar um ambiente escolar disciplinado. Os dados indicam que esses preconceitos parecem penalizar sobremaneira famílias com mais baixo nível socioeconômico e cultural e que apresentam disposições mais distantes da cultura escolar.

I- Esta pesquisa integra uma investigação mais ampla, coordenada por Maria Alice Setubal e Antônio Augusto Gomes Batista, que contou com o financiamento da Fapesp e do Fundo de Pesquisa Educação para o Século XXI. É uma iniciativa da Fundação Tide Setubal e do Cenpec, com apoio da Fundação Itaú Social e do Unicef. Os autores são pesquisadores do Cenpec.

II- Universidade de São Paulo, São Paulo, SP, Brasil.

Contato: luciana.alves@usp.br

III- Centro de Estudos e Pesquisas em Educação, Cultura e Ação Comunitária (Cenpec), São Paulo, SP, Brasil.

Contato: antonio.batista@cenpec.org.br

IV-1. Centro de Estudos e Pesquisas em Educação, Cultura e Ação Comunitária (Cenpec), São Paulo, SP, Brasil.

2. Universidade Cidade de São Paulo (Unicid), São Paulo, SP, Brasil.

Contato: vanda.ribeiro@cenpec.org.br

V- Universidade Estadual de Campinas, Campinas, SP, Brasil.

Contato: ernica@unicamp.br

Palavras-chave

Seleção de alunos – Expulsão – Relações de interdependência competitiva entre escolas – Concorrência entre escolas.

Concealed quasi-market (COSTA; KOSLINSKY, 2012; BARTHOLO, 2013), market ecology (YAIR, 1996), competitive interdependence relations (VAN ZANTEN, 2005; DELVAUX; VAN ZANTEN, 2006): despite the difference between the different constructs, they have in common the fact that schools are not isolated units, but rather – as they are situated in a student recruiting space, regardless of the education system they are connected to – they tend to establish different ways of relation, among which is competition, impelled to a larger or smaller extent by a mode of regulation of the educational system (VAN ZANTEN, 2005; DELVAUX; VAN ZANTEN, 2006).

Students are the main object of this dispute, whether because of a decrease in demand, demographic factors, the school's lack of attractiveness, or a pursuit for attracting *better* students – according to their social and academic characteristics (GEWIRTZ; BALL; BOWE, 1995). Even the competition for educators is mediated by the competition for students, since students' social and academic profile is one of the criteria for teachers' horizontal ascension (BECKER, 1952; ALVES et al. 2013).

In Brazil, the main investigations on this subject have been conducted by a group of researchers associated to the Observatório das Metrópoles. These studies examine the public education system in the city of Rio de Janeiro. In a series of successive studies, they managed to clarify both the competition process among parents for higher-prestige public schools, and student selection practices by principals and educational bureaucracy (COSTA; KOSLINSKI, 2011, 2012; BRUEL; BARTHOLO, 2012; BARTHOLO, 2013).

One important fact to be considered in the generalization of these investigations relates to the characteristics of the mode of regulation in Rio de Janeiro's educational system, mostly a municipal system: first, enrolment is not sectorized, which leaves parents some margin for choosing a school; secondly, an important part of schools provides only one level of education, causing students to seek another school as they finish that

level. Although, hypothetically, more than one option can be listed in this system, the educational bureaucracy develops hidden selection processes for distributing students according to the prestige of their schools of origin and destination, as well as to academic characteristics and family social capital. Therefore, there is a *collaboration* of sorts in schools' interdependence relationship that eventually maintains the hierarchy among them and the market ecology. It is a sort of rigged competition system in which, according to Yair (1996), the *collaboration* among schools providing different education levels – albeit on the same hierarchic level – ensures the differentiation in the social composition of schools in the system, as well as their unequal quality.

In a context where enrolment is sectorized, research of the Observatório Sociológico das Relações Família-Escola (OFSFE) examines these interdependence relations by studying families' mobilization processes in choosing a public school, with focus on the demand side, to the detriment of supply (REZENDE et al. 2011; NOGUEIRA et al. in the press).

Focusing instead on the competitive interdependence relations established on the supply side and in a context – the city of São Paulo – where the regulation model tends to inhibit both family choices and school selection practices is the general goal of this article. Research on the subject in this context shows the presence of these competitive interdependence relations among schools located in poor suburban areas of the city: they would manifest themselves through student selection processes characterized as externalization-decantation mechanisms; schools with a greater attractiveness would tend to avoid students less *suitable* to their ideals, and such students would be forwarded to nearby, less attractive schools (ÉRNICA; BATISTA, 2012).

This process would tend to create, in a same area, schools that are more homogeneous or more heterogeneous, according to students' family culture resources (ÉRNICA, BATISTA, 2012; PADILHA et al. 2013), as well as attract and keep teachers with a distinct professional

capital (ALVES et al. 2013). At the same time, these investigations also show the efforts of families from vulnerable suburban environments to circumvent enrolment sectoring in order to avoid the school designated by the computerized system in São Paulo – usually the school located in their own stigmatized, vulnerable neighborhood (CARVALHO-SILVA et al. in the press; BATISTA, CARVALHO-SILVA, 2013).

Therefore, the works cited above are situated within studies about school *avoidance* by families, rather than their choice for a school (BROCCHOLICHI; VAN ZANTEN, 1996; POUPEAU, 2011). Moreover, these studies do not focus on high-prestige schools which are recognized by their educational scores or by a relative presence of middle class families. Nor do they describe the process through which schools circumvent legislation and avoid students considered not suitable.

Therefore, the present investigation has the objective goal of understanding, in the framework of competitive interdependence maintained by schools: (i) the processes and practices through which ordinary public schools in poor suburban areas of São Paulo select students, in spite of the legislation; and (ii) the principles of action and judgment and the general dispositions that tend to guide those practices: what would a good student be for those schools? What would a bad student be? What purpose does this selection serve?¹

It was not a goal of this study to examine the extent of these selective processes, but rather to gather elements for doing so in future studies. Therefore, the study assumed an exploratory, qualitative nature.

The study and its methodological guidelines

From October 2011 to January 2012, we interviewed staff members from public basic

1- Since our interest was to reduce a diversified set of practices to a limited set of schemes or principles which guide them, practices will not be quantified in the course of our analysis.

schools in the city of São Paulo who are directly involved with enrolment: secretaries, school agents, and technical assistants.² Because they consider that they are only *following orders* – as they stressed in the interviews – and do not find themselves responsible for decisions, we assumed that these professionals would feel more free to describe how the selection of students is made. For this reason, they were chosen as the subjects of this study.

If our choice relatively decreased the degree of censorship on the approach of the subject, it has obviously resulted, on the other hand, in a limited view of selection practices, since secretaries are usually distant from the teaching process.

Considering the hidden character of the procedures that form the object of our investigation, we began the study with persons who participated in our circle of relations (who, in turn, indicated other acquaintances – therefore, we used the “snowball” technique) and, later, with other persons indicated by acquaintances from different networks of social contacts, in order to always assure a safe atmosphere during interviews.³ The “snowball” was restarted in order to avoid involving subjects from a single geographic region, or school employees from only the state or the municipal system. We extended the collection of data until we verified the recurrence of information, i.e., until the selection processes investigated no longer varied qualitatively. Interviews were discontinued when we had reached a number of eight secretaries.⁴ According to their information, in only one of the schools they worked for student selection processes did not occur. All of the schools they were allocated at are in different suburban areas

2- In order to facilitate reading, these staff members will henceforth be designated as *secretaries*.

3- Choosing the subjects for a study from the author's circle of acquaintances, or who were introduced by acquaintances, is defended in cases where proximity is a relevant condition for approaching sensitive issues. See LABOV (1978) e BOURDIEU (2007).

4- However, our data refer to a more significant number of schools, since four of the secretaries worked for at least two public schools.

of São Paulo, four of which are state schools and four municipal. One of the schools was located in the edge of a district which suffered major changes during the last decade, when it was increasingly occupied by new generations of the middle-classes. That school was the only one with an excess of vacancies, and the only one which did not receive only students from its own area. It was also the only one not located in a poor district with low socioeconomic indices.

The secretaries were not able to give accurate information on the educational indices of the schools they worked at: they described the Ideb and Idesp (Education Development Index of the State of São Paulo) scores for those schools as “it’s crappy”; “it’s low”; “it’s so-so”. Since, in order to avoid the censorship effect, we did not ask the names of the schools, we could not gather objective information about them. All secretaries but one admitted that selection processes are practiced in the schools they were currently working. The exception is one state school located in a suburban district. In this case, the secretary reported practices performed in the school where he had previously worked.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews including questions on enrolment process, school functioning conditions, school characteristics, the body of teachers and the body of students, school reputation, among others. These data are therefore always filtered by the perceptions and values of the secretaries.

We also interviewed technical staff and advisors at the Secretary of Education of São Paulo who were in charge of enrolment. In addition, a document research was conducted which enabled analyzing the legislation concerning enrolment in public schools.

Enrolment rules in São Paulo

In the state of São Paulo, the enrolment of students in public schools is regulated by ordinances enacted by the Secretary of Education of São Paulo in collaboration with

other municipal secretaries in order to fully meet the demand for basic education.

In order to guarantee their enrolment, applicants must be registered in the *Integrated Student Registration System*, which allows crossing information about demand and supply, and defines the school where each student will be enrolled (SÃO PAULO, 1995).⁵ It consists of a computerized system that uses the proximity between the school and the address provided by the family as the general criterion – the distance is determined by the post code and cannot exceed 2 kilometers. This school assignment scheme is called *enrolment sectoring*.

The address shown in the registration – which can be filled in at any school – can be the student’s home address or another place of personal interest (e.g., the work address of one of the student’s parents or relatives). In the legislation, an address other than the student’s home address is called an indicative post code.

The vacancy is offered in a school near the address indicated in the registration, through process known as *automatic compatibilization of vacancy*, which ensures that the entire demand is met – according to family-provided post code criteria, in the following order:

- (i) first, the system designates the vacancy considering the closest school to the indicative post code (in cases where an address other than the student’s home address is used);
- (ii) when the first school designated has no vacancies, then the student’s home post code is considered;
- (iii) if compatibilization still fails to produce results, the school where the registration was filled in is designated to conclude the enrolment.

5- The enrolment rules presented are based on different ordinances enacted each year. In this section, we use Ordinance 5,550/2010, valid for the school year of 2011 (SÃO PAULO, 2010). Therefore, it will not be cited in the text of the article.

Once enrolled, the student has a guaranteed right to progression in studies, i.e., as the student advances through basic school phases, or changes school, no new registration is required, only the following three steps: enrolment displacement, student transfer, and annual re-enrolment. In view of the importance of this registration system, every student who applies to a vacancy in public basic education is guaranteed a registration in it, regardless of whether real vacancies exist in the school where the registration is made. The system provides an electronically generated document that must be given to the parent or guardian as evidence that the registration has been successfully made.

Students who are already enrolled can request an *enrolment displacement* – before the beginning of the school year – or a *transfer* – when classes have already begun. To do so, applicants just have to go to the school nearest to their home. Also in these cases, an indicative post code can be used.

Using an indicative post code does not necessarily allow choosing a school, since any school within a 2-kilometer radius from the address can be designated to the applicant by an automated system – in the same way as when the student's home post code is used.

Student selection processes

Our analysis shows that student selection processes conducted by public schools occur in four moments. The first one is when the *student registration form is completed* in the system. The second and third ones occur at the times of *enrolment displacement request* and *transfer request*. The last one occurs over the school year, through the *concealed expulsion* of students already enrolled.

The practice of denying registration makes evident that, even though they are subject to the control of a computerized system, some schools resort to non-registration in order to avoid certain students: when the enrolment applicant does not know that

schools are obliged to perform the registration, this allows the clerk to *circumvent* the system by writing details down in a notebook and saying that the registration will be performed later. Apparently, this practice occurs in order to prevent the registered student from enrolling in the same school as their data were entered in the system, since this is one of the automatic compatibilization criteria.

So, that registration [...] [you] write it down on the paper, and then you say [to the parent or guardian], “if a vacancy comes up, we’ll contact you”. And [you will] add there [on the paper] an NC note, and they’ll ask, “What’s NC?”. “It’s ‘new call’”, but it’s not ‘new call’, it’s ‘not to register’”. [...] And then, [you] say the name is there and you’ll wait... The parent or guardian is advised right away to go to another school and have the registration made. It’s a way not to hold up the student nor leave him with no school. [...]. We say: “Don’t wait too long, because a vacancy may not come. We’ll say it right away so the person won’t get his hopes up, and we advise him, “Go to such and such a school, such and such another” so the person won’t stick to the hope of getting a vacancy in that school (Luana).

The two other moments when student selection occurs are when parents try to avoid certain schools and go to the secretary offices at the ones they consider more suitable to their children to check for the availability of vacancies, in order to have the enrolment displacement or transfer made, which supposedly could only be done through a change in address. This search for another school, however, can also occur due to very selection processes. As will be seen below, a student may, in spite of the legislation, be *expelled* from a school with no guarantee of a vacancy in another. In this case, the family has to seek a vacancy by itself in another school.

The selection process is put into practice based on criteria originated in judgments relating

to families' interests or behaviors and what these could mean in the school environment. When families argue the lack of outreach projects in the school of origin as a justification for transferring, the request is refused based on the assumption that those persons would not be "concerned with the teaching and learning, with the child's performance" (Carla). Another account exposes a prejudgment relating families that have access to social benefits and children's chances of becoming a problem to the school:

The parents don't work, they just want family grant, they're all registered in these social projects, but they don't work, all they really do is receive their grants. So every student that walks in with that surname, you know right away that [interrupts]... (Lúcia).

The account above also indicates another criterion based on the evaluation of families: being the brother of former students who presented discipline problems, or whose parents interfered negatively in the school's daily life makes the guarantee of enrolment more difficult.

Most folks working at the school live nearby, so they know the family, they've seen the child, they know what they're like, sometimes even by the surname. One example: there is this family, surname X, and they all have some problem (Lúcia).

If the enrolment solicitant mentions cases of quarrels with principals at the school of origin, this family is considered one with a profile that can cause conflicts in school:

There's been cases of mothers saying they'd wanted to hit the principal [of the school of origin]. If a mother comes up to you and says that, you'll think, 'if she's wanted to hit that one there, she'll hit the one here' (Lúcia).

It is not only students' parents or guardians, or students' families, who are the object of school judgment; students also have to fit into the characteristics valued by the school they seek. Schools seem to be particularly eager not to receive students in certain situations. One of them is when a transfer request occurs in the second school semester:

A transfer, we have no way of evaluating it. Now, late in the year we do. Because, if the boy's getting transferred late in the year and lives in the neighborhood, what's up with him? It's because he's been expelled (Pietra).

To Lúcia, "no one changes school in such a period with no apparent reason". The *apparent reason* refers to the selection – in this case, the *concealed expulsion* – already performed in other schools, to the detriment of the ones the student turns to in order to get a new enrolment.

According to all indications, schools are more concerned not to receive undisciplined students who, in the schools' view, can harm the progress of their work. These are more negative than positive criteria, which thus characterize them as avoidance processes, rather than selection processes:

No, not color, sex, none of that mattered; [the purpose was to keep] the ones who wouldn't cause trouble to anyone, to the principal, to other students, the ones you thought were nice, easy kids (Elena).

The criteria which guide student selection according to attributed behaviors are associated to the imaginary that characterizes a *bad student*. Such a student is identified by certain features, according to the interviewees.

The very *school of origin* is one of them. When questioned whether she rejected transfer requests of students from any

specific school (and for what reason), one of the secretaries answered:

Well, it's a state school in the area. They have from 5th to 8th grades to secondary school. Well, [it is] the one the principal invites them to leave/has invited them to leave. So students are like that/ we know there's a lot of problem-students [from that school]. It's a very big school, you see? But, like... not all of them are [problem-students]... And sometimes the good ones pay for the others (Elena).

Belonging to the student body of a school with a reputation of having an agitated routine raises suspicions at the time of a transfer request, thus justifying vacancy denial. In this case, the Ideb (Basic Education Development Index) was not used by any secretary as a telling feature of the school's reputation. As affirmed earlier, the agents were not able to indicate precisely the Ideb for the schools they worked in, describing it generically as "it's so-so" or "it's low". The "reputation" of a good school, according to interviewees' accounts, is fundamentally based on its good discipline and on management – the latter being understood chiefly as the results it achieves in organizing discipline and the work environment among educators and employees.

The same suspicion about a student's behavior is raised by the *school's location* and the community it serves:

In that area, it [the school where the secretary worked in] was one of the best; there were worse. They were all in corners, some 200-300 meters. There was this municipal school, and behind it there was another, municipal one, at the corner of that street there was another, a state one, and among those, the best was this one where I was. [Researcher: State school?] Yes. The best, as it were, was this state one. There was this shunning thing: when a student came from such and such a school,

from one of those three, and dropped in there [...] Then there's no vacancy (Elisa).

However, suspicion could apply simply to students' home location:

Because it [the school] was close to two favelas: community X, in [district name], [...] and Y [...]. We could tell it was biased to one side [to the public of one of the communities]. One side studied more, and the other didn't. The other wanted to get in [the school] to sell drugs, that kind of thing. Mothers would go there to assault the principal, the teachers, secretary staff. You saw those problems coming, you sure skipped it (Elisa).

In the absence of evidence of a student's good behavior, a process of "investigation" – the word used by a few secretaries – can be conducted to collect evidence. The main strategy consists in an interview, of sorts, with parents and applicants, with the purpose of learning the reasons that justified the demand for a vacancy, as well as any *conduct deviations*. The interview is often sufficient to provide indications to the secretary that the student does not correspond to the school's expectations, due to his *behavior during the enrolment and the information provided by his mother*:

[...] the student's just come in, for example, [and he says to his mother] "shut up"! If he's treating his mother like that, right? [...] The mother would try to speak, he cuts her short. And sometimes the mother herself goes: "my son steals...". One mother asked us to call the Guardianship Council [Researcher: and in those cases, you didn't make the registration?] We recommended a school that was more suitable to his age [...] (Elisa).⁶

When the investigation interview is not enough, other strategies are used for examining

6- The account, as may be seen, also displays a case of registration denial.

the applicant's situation, like phone calls to his school of origin, in order to check his *history* and any attempts at externalizing him as a *problem student*:

We call the school and check what the student's behavior's like. If they say, "He's a good student, he just left because of the address" [then he is accepted]. [When it's a "student who's been causing trouble"] they won't say, 'Don't enroll him". They'll say: "Oh, well, you these things, don't you? He's been invited" – we don't say expelled – "he's been invited to leave (Elisa).

Age also appears as a relevant criterion, implying that the greater the age-grade distortion, the smaller the chance to have the enrolment performed. According to the secretaries, an advanced age could camouflage relationship difficulties in school, or, depending on the distortion, lead to a series of problems.

In addition to age, analyzing the school record, which is registered in the system, also provides elements for putting selection into practice:

When they come from another school... because sometimes they come from another district and we don't know the secretary... we log into the system to see what their grades are like, if there's too many absences, if they've got low grades (Elisa).

The analysis of grades seems to be used not to select those with a better performance, but to avoid those with a poor one. Moreover, the account below shows that this search is, according to all indications, also motivated by an attempt at investigating the student's relation to discipline: "I think they haven't considered this detail before: I think they haven't considered before that grades can be associated to indiscipline, that an undisciplined student isn't interested in studies, therefore, he's got no grades" (Luana).

In the checking of a student's record, the number of absences is another piece of information gathered. Absences provide elements to evaluate *assiduity*, an important criterion for ensuring, according to secretaries, that the vacancy is not "wasted", as a regularly absent student would be a potential dropout. According to Lúcia:

There are a few cases, for example, of a child who studied and failed for absence for many years in a row; he's been in and out of many schools; the school eventually will prevent that child from returning".

The student selection practices reported thus far are conducted by the school in response to families' attempts at choosing a school or, in an even more defensive way, to prevent the enrolment of students *expelled* from other schools. The practices in those cases are preventive ones and, as highlighted earlier, rather than selection-oriented, those are *avoidance* practices concerning students and their families. Always according to the secretaries' accounts, the principle regulating the *avoidance* process is the possibility that both the students and their families might disturb the school environment and not favor good school work conditions: the family, on the one hand, because of its lack of interest in their children's education, its lack of control over their children and youths, and above all, apparently, its incivility and disrespect for school authorities; the students, on the other hand, because they are "difficult" and "impossible", with a high absenteeism, "problem students" who do not respect even their parents, who steal, who are from "favelas" or from "problematic" schools, who have been "causing trouble" in other schools.

Expulsion processes

There are also sorting practices conducted when problems are already being experienced by the school, aiming at the *expulsion* or

externalization (ÉRNICA; BATISTA, 2012) of students, after the enrolment and over the school year:

Normally, [the school] tells to the parent, “Find another school because there’s just no way this student can stay here anymore”. Then the parent often signs the transfer, only there’s no transfer notice from the school he’s going to. He’ll sign the transfer with no defined vacancy, sometimes, right? When he goes for the vacancy, then he can’t find it, because usually the school’s done the sorting at the interview, when it receives the student, and then [the school] denies him a vacancy, even when there is one. [...] So... the parent’s sought the transfer, been to another school... couldn’t get it in the area, then he’ll come back for the vacancy in this school the student was. It’s very hard to get a return. It’s only really when he goes to certain agencies that will determine for the student to go back to the school (Luana).

Another form of *expulsion* consists of putting pressure on the family, as it realizes the child or youth’s *inadaptation* to the school’s discipline rules, in order to have it require his transfer to a school that is more suitable to the child.

Once the student has been expelled and denied a vacancy in other schools, it is necessary (when the parents have enough information about their rights), to resort to other administrative levels in order to have access to a new vacancy. Otherwise, the child will not go to school at all. However, according to the interviews, few resort to the Guardianship Council or the Education Board, in view of the ignorance about the rules that regulate schools’ functioning and the characteristics of the public that is most affected by selection practices, since “normally, these are destitute students” from families with little education and little time to “watch their children’s school performance”, as Luana affirmed.

Even those who resort to the Guardianship Council have no guarantee that they will be able to return to school, since the school is the one responsible for notifying the parents or guardians that the enrolment has been made by court order. The school may not inform the parents within a deadline that would avoid the student’s failure for excess of absences. Thus, the student is failed, which discourages him from resuming studies.

The mother goes there to talk about it and complain, and then she’ll leave and wait for the answer [that enrolment has been made by court order] it’s the school [laughter]. And the school’s got him in the system. Only the school, if it’s a case that’s really that serious, it won’t contact the parents. Then... later... the old story: “Madam, you didn’t come here to sign it, you didn’t bring the student to attend. Look, he’s been enrolled since such and such a date” (Luana).

According to the secretaries, in these *expulsion* cases, there is often omission on the part of Guardianship Councils. When asked about the role of the Guardianship Council, Elisa answered:

They said they’d find another school [...] assign students to another school, but I’ve never seen the Guardianship Council [going] all the way in this case. [...] It’s the mother who goes from school to school. In the best case, the Guardianship Council would give the numbers of some four or five schools for the mother to call.

In expulsion cases, the search for a vacancy without the help of the Guardianship Council or the Education Board implies a greater exposition to selection processes in other schools, which prevents the transfer from being completed. This whole process counters the instructions of the Secretary of Education of the State of São Paulo,

which establish the *mandatory transfer* to another school in cases of “committing discipline faults”, as long as the School Council discusses such cases both with parents and students (SÃO PAULO, 2009, p. 28-29).

In many cases recounted, these instructions were disregarded. This is what Pietra affirms:

If it's a problem student, it's determined by the [School] Council to have him expelled. But nowadays, it feels like you're kind of free to do it. He's caused trouble, he'll go. It's like, throw the ball to someone else, we're not gonna work with that kid.

In the case of municipal schools, we did not find any official guidelines regulating compulsory transfer, but a bill is being debated on in the São Paulo City Council that establishes compulsory transfer in cases of discipline faults (SÃO PAULO, 2011).

The concealed expulsion reveals attempts at improving the management conditions of a school to the detriment of other schools or, to use an interviewee's phrase, “the ball is thrown to someone else”, who will be responsible for receiving the expelled student⁷. Expulsion, according to the secretaries, is an attempt at managing the conflicts that emerge in the agitated routine of the schools they worked in. This routine is, according to them, marked by different problems from the ones normally associated with a school, as seen in the account of Elisa: “it wasn't the kind of thing you see here [in her current school]: a student won't do his homework, he's absent a lot. It wasn't that. It was for drug dealing, assault”.

Managing issues like homework refusal requires, in the view of the secretaries, building internal mechanisms more directly related to the role of a school than those involving

7 - We also found references to *exchanges* of students between schools close to each other, and, sometimes, from different systems (i.e., municipal and state systems), thus revealing a cooperation of sorts. Exchanges are based in the idea that by separating undisciplined students from their schoolmates, the former would change their behavior.

the issues highlighted in the account. To the interviewees, these cases often imply that the students involved must be summarily expelled, as it is clear in the excerpt below, where one of the secretaries recounts a case of expulsion involving students that had smoked marijuana in the school's toilet:

[...] It was the last week of April, the last week of second bimester tests. Then the coordinator took the three [students] to her office and explained them, “You're going to finish your tests so you won't leave without your grades; then you find another school, because this one is not being of any use to you” [...] They were, one was over 18, and a minor, 17 years old – and this one normally didn't use it. Then the tests were over, they went there, signed the papers and were directed to another school (Gustavo).

Rita's account indicates that the pursuit of good functioning in classroom can cause some pressure on the part of teachers on principals, who in turn adopt the expulsion practices:

When the problem is in the classroom, when it's really affecting the classroom, teachers complain a lot. They don't determine it [who is to be expelled]; they may even, well, I don't know if we can put it like... pressuring or requesting... Let's say *suggesting*. He'll suggest. [...] The principal sometimes gives the final verdict, as it were [laughter].

The *final verdict* is the responsibility of the school's principal, i.e., it is ultimately the principal who determines the cases where expulsion applies, although in the state education system this decision belongs to the School Board.

The pursuit for “nice, easy kids” and the expulsion of those whose conduct would

involve discipline transgression – reaching, as in the cases of assault, violent acts – reveal the conditioning factors of the processes analyzed in this work, as well as their guiding principle or scheme. Although they are conducted in different ways, since student *avoidance* has a prophylactic role, while expulsion has a remedial one, both can be understood, although not justified, in the context of the problems managed by schools. Far from being restricted only to education activities, these problems are, in the viewpoint of interviewees, situated in the wider sphere of the difficulties that a school faces in imposing its expectations concerning students' attitudes and behaviors.

The secretaries cite school limitations in responding satisfactorily to students' demands, and they evaluated the selection processes as a consequence of schools' isolation from other social services:

For a problem student, we have no support. The Guardianship Council, a psychologist, a phonoaudiologist, we don't have that kind of support. Because when you're well aided... a community health center... all these things, we could work with that student, you know? Like when people say, "it's this kid's emotional condition, his father and mother have problems"; then, like, there's no such an aid [and] what I think is: the one major lack is actually the lack of aid [...] Because we try (Pietra).

It is latent in the accounts the way these selection processes contribute to aggravate social inequalities. The ones most exposed to the procedures identified in this study are described by the secretaries as lesser-educated families, who live in such a condition that they are unable to question the denial of the right to education that this selection represents. In the words of one of the interviewees, "It's the humbler people, really, people who didn't have access to studies, destitute people who are not used to questioning, to quarreling, you know".

Conclusions

The results of this study, according to all indications, bring contributions to the research on competitive interdependence relations among schools by making evident the concealed practices through which public schools select students. These contributions also seem to reside in understanding the principles that guide this selection, as well as in understanding them in a context of schools located in poor suburban areas and operating under a mode of regulation which inhibits families from choosing a school, and students from competing for a school.

According to the analysis of the secretaries' accounts, we were able to understand the student selection processes occurring in various moments of school life, which happen as: (i) an enrolment denial or *avoidance*, i.e., a reaction to attempts at choosing by parents, who reject the school designated by the sectorized system, or a reaction to the very dynamic prompted by selection processes, when a school avoids or *expels* a student without guaranteeing him a vacancy in another school; (ii) or they can happen actively, through the *exclusion* of *problem students*.

The agents in this process are staff members related to school administrative positions, among which the principal – who apparently holds the power to decide –, assistants, administration subordinates, support agents, and secretaries. The last three are directly related with demand; therefore, they are the ones responsible for executing the selection processes operated in the school. Although they are not normally the creators of these processes, since they claim they only follow orders, the secretaries are the ones responsible for putting them into practice. These staff members respond to demands from various school actors, including teachers, who, by demanding attitudes from the management team to solve indiscipline and violence cases, generate pressure for expulsions and for pursuing the maintenance of a disciplined environment.

When evaluating an enrolment request, schools take into account: family justification for choosing the school, the school of origin and its location, the student's home location, his age-grade distortion, his and his family's behavior as expressed in words and attitudes, his grades and amount of absences, and his family's characteristics. The procedures to gather these pieces of evidence range from interviews with the applicants, to phone calls to the school of origin, to analyzing school life records, which are available in the Student Registration System.

Enrolment will be denied – and this seems to be the principle regulating the practices – the more the *investigation* gathers indications that:

- (i) the family expresses difficult dispositions susceptible of putting it in conflict with the school, above all with the principal, as well as, particularly, values and dispositions distant from those defended by the school (e.g., pursuing social benefits, instead of actual school ones, such as teaching quality), a supposed incivility, and little attention to its children's education, whether at home or in school;
- (ii) The student expresses a supposed tendency to indiscipline.

The *investigation* permits drawing a vague picture about families' actual behavior and, particularly, about its main target, i.e., the student. In addition, more than it seeks to select and attract students with specific characteristics, it seems – and this should be stressed – to aim at *avoiding* a certain student profile, thus organizing itself rather around a set of negative categories than around positive ones.

The suspicion of a *forced transfer* or a *concealed expulsion*, made evident by an untimely transfer request, is enough for an enrolment to be denied, normally with no actual checking of the seriousness of such *reassignment*. The reason, according to all

indications, is that it is taken in itself as an eloquent signal of the student's inadaptation to school rules, of serious indiscipline, and therefore as a serious threat to school order. The same interpretation is applied to other indices found in the student's school life, such as absenteeism and low school performance. The interpretation of explicit justifications (and the implicit behavior of parents as they request the transfer or displacement) is fundamentally guided by the desire to avoid problem parents or problem families. Therefore, it is not difficult to realize that schools, even though in a diffuse way – and, perhaps, because of it –, avoid precisely those who distance themselves most from them, those whose ethic and cultural dispositions supposedly could threaten its functioning most.

Although the subjects of the study spoke more overtly of the fear of indiscipline, which, according to the interviewees, seems to be a problem routinely faced in the schools they work in, the selection processes described *do not* produce, in most cases, evidence that the students avoided are indeed undisciplined. This leads us to suppose, therefore, that it is stigmas and prejudices that found the selection conducted.

The analysis of expulsion cases deserves further research. Although we were not able to deepen in this article the investigation on data concerning the reasons indicated by the secretaries to motivate *reassignments*, the information presented show that these would be connected, in generic terms, to situations of drug dealing and consumption, assaults, a negative leadership exercised by a few students, as well as the difficulties they cause to teachers' work in the classroom. *Expelled* students would be from poorer, lesser-educated families who are less informed about the education system, and who would resist less to actions that deny their rights.

It could be that our conclusions about selection process motivations – the pursuit of supposedly more disciplined students – arise from our choice of the secretaries as the

subjects of this study, i.e., staff members with little connection to the teaching-learning process. They could also arise from the characteristics of the schools that formed our research field. However, studies conducted in other contexts indicate discipline as a key aspect in establishing the criteria for choosing a school in non-wealthy environments, both by families (BATISTA; CARVALHO-SILVA; ALVES, 2013) and teachers (BECKER, 1952), which allows us to infer that the presence of discipline-related criteria in the student selection described by secretaries might express not only their point of view, but a key organizational dimension of the schools they work in. They seem to compete, therefore, not for the best students in terms of school performance, but, as one of the secretaries mentioned, for “nice, easy students”.

If all this is true, then the data presented lead to this hypothesis: in the São Paulo school system’s regulation mode, the introduction of measures in line with the post-bureaucratic model, particularly regarding the strengthening

of external evaluations – and, in the case of state schools, the creation of financial bonus – seems not to have impacted the school routine. As seen earlier, the secretaries did not know the Ideb or Idesp scores for their schools, and selection processes happen not particularly in order to find the best students in terms of performance, but to sort off supposedly undisciplined ones. This inference, however, could also derive from our choice of the study’s subjects, even though they are the ones who operate enrolment processes directly.

However, because they are distant from pedagogical action, only in future research, which should include the viewpoints of managers, coordinators, and teachers, will we be able to establish sound relations between the effects of these changes and the competition practices among schools in poor suburban areas, particularly those located in vulnerable environments, as well as the relationship between those practices and the dynamics arising from the sociocultural characteristics of the population they are aimed at.

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Maurício Érnica is a professor at Faculdade de Educação da Universidade Estadual de Campinas (Unicamp).

Antônio Augusto Gomes Batista is a research coordinator at Cenpec; he holds a doctorate in Education from Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG), and is a CNPq grant holder.

Luciana Alves has a Master's degree from Faculdade de Educação da Universidade de São Paulo.

Vanda Mendes Ribeiro holds a doctorate from Faculdade de Educação da Universidade de São Paulo (FEUSP); she is an assistant coordinator at Cenpec and a professor in the Post-Graduation Program in Education at Universidade Cidade de São Paulo (Unicid).