

The Exame Nacional do Ensino Médio (ENEM) and the reproduction of social inequalities

O Exame Nacional do Ensino Médio (ENEM) e a reprodução das desigualdades sociais

El Exame Nacional do Ensino Médio (ENEM) y la reproducción de las desigualdades sociales

Cristiano das Neves Bodart^I

David Tyrone Santos Coimbra^{II}

ABSTRACT

The article uses multiple correspondence analysis (MCA) — a statistical method employed by Bourdieu as an extension of sociological analysis — to investigate the relationships between cultural and economic capital and the performance indices of the 2022 ENEM participants. The objective was to understand to what extent this examination contributes to the reproduction/reduction of social inequalities. Taking the state of Alagoas as a clipping, the results reveal that there is a reproduction of inequalities in access to institutionalized cultural capital that can be converted into access to higher education through the Unified Selection System (Sistema de Seleção Unificada — SISU). More specifically, there is a strong correlation between parents' sociocultural profiles, place of residence, and exam scores. The need for comprehensive and lasting state cultural interventions that involve not only young people and the school, but also the families and social environment of these students is highlighted.

Keywords: National High School Exam. Cultural Capital. Social Reproduction. Higher Education.

RESUMO

O artigo utiliza a análise de correspondências múltiplas (ACM) — método estatístico empregado por Bourdieu como extensão da análise sociológica — para investigar as relações entre capitais culturais e econômicos e os índices de desempenho dos participantes do ENEM de 2022. O objetivo foi compreender em que medida esse exame contribui para a reprodução/redução das desigualdades sociais. Tomando como recorte o estado de Alagoas, os resultados revelam haver reprodução das desigualdades de acesso ao capital cultural institucionalizado que pode ser convertido em acesso ao ensino superior por meio do Sistema de Seleção Unificada (SISU). Mais especificamente, há forte correlação entre perfis socioculturais dos pais, local de residência e notas no exame. É destacada a necessidade de intervenções culturais estatais abrangentes e duradouras que envolvam não apenas os jovens e a escola, mas também a família e o ambiente social desses estudantes.

Palavras-chave: Exame Nacional do Ensino Médio. Capital Cultural. Reprodução Social. Ensino Superior.

^IUniversidade Federal de Alagoas Maceió, AL, Brazil. Email: cristianobodart@gmail.com  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2195-2145>

^{II}Universidade Federal de Alagoas Maceió, AL, Brazil. Email: davidcoimbra@outlook.com  <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-1375-3976>

RESUMEN

El artículo utiliza el Análisis de Correspondencias Múltiples (MCA) — método estadístico empleado por Bourdieu como extensión del análisis sociológico — para investigar las relaciones entre el capital cultural y económico y los índices de desempeño de los participantes del ENEM 2022. El objetivo fue comprender en qué medida este examen contribuye a la reproducción/reducción de las desigualdades sociales. Tomando como recorte el estado de Alagoas, los resultados revelan que existe una reproducción de las desigualdades en el acceso al capital cultural institucionalizado que puede ser convertida en acceso a la educación superior a través del SISU. Más específicamente, existe una fuerte correlación entre los perfiles socioculturales de los padres, el lugar de residencia y los puntajes de los exámenes. Se destaca la necesidad de intervenciones culturales estatales integrales y duraderas que involucren no solo a los jóvenes y a la escuela, sino también a las familias y al entorno social de estos estudiantes.

Palabras clave: Examen Nacional de Educación Secundaria. Capital Cultural. Reproducción Social. Enseñanza Superior.

INTRODUCTION

For a long time, formal education was conceived as an infallible instrument of social mobility, presenting schooling as a solution to the problems of socioeconomic inequalities. Public education, free, democratic, and meritocratic, seemed to play its role as an impartial institution, ensuring equal educational opportunities for all (Nogueira and Nogueira, 2002). This conception was present in functionalist and evolutionist perspectives, notably influenced by the ideas of Émile Durkheim (1858–1917). However, critical and reproductive theories challenged this conception.

The French sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron (2016; 2018), in *The Inheritors* (1964) and *Reproduction* (1970), when analyzing French formal education, identified contradictions inherent in the education system and its alleged neutrality, which supposedly would guarantee accessible and equal education for everyone. Their analyses allowed them to infer that, instead of promoting equality and social transformation, the French school system perpetuated inequalities and legitimized social privileges (Nogueira and Nogueira, 2002).

Thus, for Bourdieu (2015a), the teaching model analyzed ended up perpetuating social inequalities. In seeking to explain social reproduction through the education system, he demonstrated how certain social classes performed better compared to others. This was explained by examining the types of knowledge and dispositions for certain social practices that students had already acquired in environments outside of school, in contrast with the knowledge valued and devalued by the school system.

The unraveling of social reproductions through education has guided a series of efforts to mitigate this problem. In Brazil, more recently, in 2009, the integration between the National High School Exam (*Exame Nacional do Ensino Médio* — ENEM) and the Unified Selection System (*Sistema de Seleção Unificada* — SISU) was observed, along with the adoption of Law No. 12,711/2012, which established quotas for historically underprivileged groups. These initiatives were aimed at promoting greater democratization of education in the country (Oliveira, 2015; Lourenço, 2016). Since then, the ENEM has been recognized as one of the main means of access to higher education in Brazil. According to the Ministry of Education (Inep, 2022a), in the 2022 edition, 3,396,632 Brazilians registered to take the exam, and in 2023, 1,073,024 registered with SISU to compete for places in public universities based on ENEM results (Brasil, 2023a).

Oliveira (2015) argues that the ENEM may have played a significant role in the inclusion of less privileged social classes in higher education, partly due to the type of questions used in the exams, which focus on logical reasoning and interpretation. This allows for better performance from students who did not have a more comprehensive basic education. However, it is also important to consider the increased availability of higher education spots in recent years, as well as the adoption of the exam as part of the affirmative actions of the quota law, as factors that may have contributed to accessibility.

Oliveira (2015) highlights that all policies aimed at democratizing higher education must include measures to improve basic education and ensure a more equitable process. Furthermore, he emphasizes that simply expanding access to higher education at the selection stage is not effective, as it maintains the same inequalities established in students' basic education.

Although SISU takes into account the social reality of its participants when implementing the quota system, the selection for higher education may still be perpetuating educational social inequalities, resulting in the concentration of students from better socioeconomic conditions in courses related to professions with higher social and economic prestige. Therefore, it is crucial to carry out constant and differentiated evaluations, an effort that we are undertaking in this article. We do not intend to state whether the ENEM is important or not, but rather to highlight aspects that may guide its improvement.

Several studies, using different approaches and methodologies, have identified correlations with students' performance on the ENEM. For example, Silva *et al.* (2020) found a relationship between lower performance and attendance at state public schools, as well as low family income, while higher performance was associated with attendance at private and federal schools, along with higher family income. Torres *et al.* (2020) demonstrated, through regression modeling, a relationship between good performance on the 2017 ENEM by students from private schools in Rio Grande do Sul and better family socioeconomic conditions. Souza *et al.* (2022), when exploring INEP data related to the ENEM conducted in the Northeast between 2015 and 2019, observed that parents' education level, type of school, and access to tools such as cell phones, computers, and the internet were determining factors for good exam results. Jaloto and Primi (2021) found a positive association between better performance on the 2018 ENEM and attendance at private schools, as well as a significant correlation between favorable socioeconomic indicators and higher scores; this was also concluded by Carmo, Heckler, and Carvalho (2020) when examining the top and bottom 5% of student scores in Rio Grande do Sul in the 2019 edition. In the same edition, Faillace, Britto, and Costa (2023) also identified correlations between socioeconomic profiles and performance. Rocha *et al.* (2022), exploring the microdata of performance in the Northeast region in the area of mathematics and its technologies from the ENEM, from 2017 to 2019, also identified these same correlations. However, none of these studies adopted a multifactorial approach to investigate the correlations between cultural and economic capital and exam results, an effort that we undertake in this research.

In this article, we present the results of multifactorial analyses (or multiple correspondence analysis) of variables collected in the 2022 ENEM microdata, along with the clarification of the theoretical and conceptual frameworks guiding the analysis. To better operationalize the data, and due to certain peculiarities, we focused on a spatial subset limited to the state of Alagoas. Our goal was to analyze the correlations between assessment performance and the cultural and economic capital of the participants, as well as to understand individuals' access opportunities to higher education courses through SISU-2023. For this, we compared it with the cutoff scores of the courses offered by the Federal University of Alagoas (*Universidade Federal de Alagoas* — UFAL). It is important to emphasize that performance on the ENEM is measured by a score, which can be

used by students to access higher education through SISU, depending on their evaluation. This score can later be converted into social and economic gains. Quotas make this conversion somewhat more likely, although it also depends on the score obtained on the exam. We will detail later this conversion system between score, access to higher education, and social mobility.

The theoretical-methodological approach adopted is based on the contributions of Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron (2018), but specifically on their analyses of multiple correspondences (MCA)¹ and theoretical reflections about the system of social reproduction observed in the examination of the French educational system.

MCA is a statistical method that has been widely used by Bourdieu in his sociological analyses due to its ability to assess correlations of multiple effects occurring simultaneously. MCA allows “visually representing the relationships between the modalities of categorical variables through proximities and relative distances in a two-dimensional Cartesian space” (Bertoncello, 2022, p. 24).

The importance of this research lies in examining whether the ENEM can promote social mobility for the less privileged classes by providing better access to higher education, or if, by denying this access, it perpetuates existing social inequalities. Although it is a study limited to the state of Alagoas, the results allow us to reflect on the impacts of the ENEM and SISU on the cultural conditions of students, which may or may not help reduce social inequalities.

In addition to this introduction and the concluding remarks, this article is structured into two distinct sections. The first is dedicated to the theoretical and methodological foundation, in which we provide a brief overview of Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological perspective on education, along with some preliminary reflections on the ENEM. We do this with the aim of guiding the analyses that will be presented in the final section. In that same section, we also describe the methodological procedures employed in the research. In the second section, we will present the results obtained and the sociological reflections that these data allowed us to make.

THEORETICAL-METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

In this section, we will present the theoretical-methodological guidelines that drive our collection, systematization, and analysis of data, based on Bourdieu’s dispositionalist theory. We start from the assumption that social agents, throughout their socialization processes, acquire social dispositions regarding practices, tastes, values, beliefs, and feelings. These dispositions are shaped by differentiated socializations, resulting in specific characteristics that are more or less socially valued, an arbitrary criterion defined by the dominant class. In this context, this class tends to favor its own dispositions, while devaluing those adopted by the working classes.

Bourdieu (2015b) introduces the concept of cultural capital to describe these social dispositions acquired in the context of students’ social origin, which determine their access to a variety of benefits within the school environment. This concept, referred to as cultural capital, will be fundamental to explaining the process of reproduction and legitimization of inequalities through the educational institution. The concept of cultural capital is used to designate the ingrained cultural dispositions and the relationship with cultural goods considered “legitimate” by the dominant class. In this context, we adopt the three states of cultural capital proposed by Bourdieu (2015b): embodied, objectified, and institutionalized capital.

1 MCA is a multivariate statistical technique used to analyze relationships between categorical variables in a dataset. This analysis allows for identifying patterns and associations between different variable categories, visually representing these relationships in a two-dimensional space. Through MCA, it is possible to explore the underlying structure of the data and identify complex trends and associations that may not be immediately apparent in a univariate or bivariate analysis.

In the incorporated state, cultural capital is revealed through the durable characteristics of the organism and cannot be transferred immediately; it is transmitted hereditarily in a concealed manner. It can only be accumulated over time by the individual themselves and consists of the set of embodied practices. This type of capital shapes the agent's perception of the world and their own perception within it, influencing their ways of acting.² This capital is acquired through contact with social spaces where it is present, such as schools, theaters, museums, among others.

In its objectified state, cultural capital is expressed through the possession of cultural goods, such as writings, paintings, monuments, among others, which can be transferred between individuals but require prior possession of embodied cultural capital for their proper use and appreciation. Owning a collection of artworks not only reflects the owner's economic power but also confers symbolic value through the possession of objects that may or may not be part of the repertoire of artistic expressions valued by a dominant class (Bourdieu, 2015b).

In the institutionalized state, cultural capital manifests itself through diplomas, which are valued as certificates of cultural competencies, granting the holder a conventional, stable, and legally guaranteed value (Bourdieu, 2015b). This institutionalized cultural capital transforms economic capital into cultural capital through the labor market and is associated, at least in part, with the assurance of a minimum return on the resources invested in the educational trajectory, making this guarantee the main driver of this investment (Bourdieu, 2015b).

In addition to cultural capital, Bourdieu (2015b) develops the concept of economic capital, understood as material and symbolic goods with monetary value, including money. According to Bourdieu (2015b), cultural capital can, under certain circumstances, be transformed into economic capital. Observing our empirical object, we notice that in some cases, social agents seek social advancement through cultural capital, which would later be converted into economic capital. In these exchanges, institutionalized cultural capitals have unequal values in the economic market. For example, some higher education diplomas are more easily converted into economic capital (income) than others, which explains the differences in competition for course spots and, consequently, in the cutoff scores. Empirically speaking, the ENEM, for example, represents a way to obtain a score (institutionalized cultural capital) that is used as a "bargaining chip" in the selection process for admission to higher education courses (also an institutionalized capital), where individuals can acquire cultural capital with the expectation of achieving the objectified cultural capital (the diploma) and, later, converting it into economic capital.

Thus,

The notion of cultural capital was initially imposed as an indispensable hypothesis to account for the unequal school performance of children from different social classes, relating "school success," that is, the benefits that children from different classes and class fractions can obtain in the school market, to the distribution of cultural capital among classes and class fractions (Bourdieu, 2015b, p. 81).

Our goal is to examine whether ENEM reduces or reproduces inequalities in access to higher education through the acquisition of institutionalized cultural capital, represented by the score achieved on the exam, and its application in the competition for access to places in public higher

² For this reason, Bourdieu's theory is framed as "dispositionalist," since it seeks to understand the ways of thinking, feeling, believing, and acting of social agents based on the social incorporated by them.

education institutions. For our tests, we used the cutoff scores from the Federal University of Alagoas (*Universidade Federal de Alagoas* — UFAL).³

This process occurs in the context of competitive relations, especially among different social classes, since the value of this cultural capital depends on its scarcity. For this reason, it is common to observe historically privileged social groups positioning themselves against the implementation of quota policies in public universities. Thus, there is a constant struggle among agents to maintain or change their position within the social space they occupy (Bourdieu, 2008).

Bourdieu (2015a) emphasizes that the influence of cultural capital on a child's academic success can be understood based on the set of cultural capitals present in their family, encompassing not only the primary elements but the entire scope of their family context. These inherited cultural capitals provide a range of advantages to children from more privileged classes (Bourdieu, 2015a). Furthermore, Bourdieu (2015a) argues that an educational system that requires students to possess a set of essential cultural capitals for the development of their academic skills can only function efficiently if everyone has access to these required cultural capitals; otherwise, the system is prone to crisis. The massification of education ends up exacerbating this scenario, as schools increasingly consist of students who lack this necessary cultural inheritance. Bourdieu and Passeron (2016, p. 31) points out that educational systems:

they tend to reproduce the system of cultural arbitrariness characteristic of this social formation, that is, the dominance of the prevailing cultural arbitrariness, thus contributing to the reproduction of the power relations that place this cultural arbitrariness in a dominant position.

In contexts where access to higher education is mediated by exams, as is the case in Brazil, these tests become a tool of “separation” between those who have acquired and those who have not acquired the necessary cultural capital to enter higher education, thus transforming educational inequalities into a means of reproducing social inequalities. In this way, embodied cultural capital is converted into institutionalized cultural capital (grades obtained), which has value in determining access to higher education. This access, in turn, helps to increase the embodied cultural capital of admitted students, which later becomes institutionalized cultural capital in the form of certificates.

For Bourdieu and Passeron (2016), all pedagogical action is, objectively, a form of symbolic violence, just like any exercise of power that imposes and legitimizes one interpretation to the detriment of another, concealing the power relations underlying this imposition. The success of the dominant pedagogical action among groups and social classes results from various factors, including: the pedagogical ethos (system of dispositions) internalized by individuals; the sanctions imposed by this pedagogical action on different family pedagogical practices; the value attributed by social markets to the products resulting from dominant pedagogical practices; and the value conferred on cultural capital (cultural goods) that is transmitted by families, according to their compliance with the norms imposed by the dominant pedagogical action (Bourdieu and Passeron, 2016).

Bourdieu and Passeron (2015a) argues that the functionalist approach to school conceals the influence of the cultural heritage transmitted by the student's family and its impact on the school trajectory. The family plays a fundamental role, especially in the early years of schooling, by determining the variety of resources (types of capital) invested in relation to future objectives and

³ It is important to highlight that students can also convert their ENEM scores into entry into higher education through SISU, at public universities (federal, state, and district) and federal institutes in other Brazilian states. However, we use the cutoff scores of UFAL courses as a benchmark for analyzing possible conversion.

achievements, in addition to contributing to the development of a certain attitude towards school. When the school treats all students as equals, it does not take into account the cultural differences between them nor class inequalities, which ends up reproducing the inequalities that already exist. Although we do not have access to the trajectories of the social agents analyzed here, who are participants in ENEM, we searched, through the questionnaires answered, variables indicative of their economic and cultural capitals, with the objective of observing whether there are correlations between these capitals and the grades obtained in the exam.

Pierre Bourdieu and Passeron (2016) emphasizes that exams are instruments that express the values of schools and the preferences of the educational system. They confer legitimacy on certain types of knowledge and expressions, reinforcing their value and/or maintaining the cultural domination of certain forms of knowledge. Thus, because of their legitimizing role, not only should the school institution be examined, but the exams themselves as well.

In this way, we will approach the ENEM as a valuative instrument operationalized by the State. We start from the assumption that this exam legitimizes cultural capital through its institutionalization, by assigning scores and certifications that can be used (converted) in the competition for places in higher education. The score of this exam constitutes institutionalized cultural capital, as it is employed as a reference in various classification processes, both social and institutional. As observed by Bourdieu (2007), for less privileged classes, this capital is used as a means of social mobility, whereas for more privileged classes, it functions as a tool to preserve their position in the class structure. As Bourdieu (2015a, p. 41) emphasized when analyzing the French educational system:

The opportunities for access to higher education show the result of a direct or indirect selection that, throughout schooling, weighs with unequal strictness on individuals from different social classes. A young person from the upper layer has eighty times more chances of entering university than the child of an agricultural worker and forty times more than the child of a laborer, and their chances are also twice as high as those of a young person from the middle class..

Under these premises, we conducted a qualitative-quantitative analysis. Our goal was to investigate the concurrent correlations between the results obtained by participants of the 2022 ENEM in the state of Alagoas and a set of aspects of their respective social backgrounds. In that year, 67,723 people registered to take the exam in Alagoas (INEP, 2022c). The production of our research corpus began with the collection of variables from the ENEM-2022 microdata made available by the Anísio Teixeira National Institute for Educational Studies and Research (*Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira*) (INEP, 2022c)⁴, which include the participants' scores on the exam and the data from the socioeconomic questionnaire administered by INEP at the time of registration for the exam.

The choice to focus on data from the state of Alagoas is justified by the fact that it ranks in the first quartile in terms of the Basic Education Development Index (*Índice de Desenvolvimento da Educação Básica* — IDEB) scores and failure rates, showing the poorest high school results in 2021. Alagoas has a pass rate (of 0.88%) slightly above the national average (of 0.85%), and the 4th worst IDEB in the country (score 3.6) (INEP, 2022b). On the other hand, Alagoas has the highest poverty rate in Brazil, with 51.7% of its population living in poverty (IBGE, 2021). In this sense, the state is a good case study for the intended examinations.

⁴ The questionnaire results are publicly available in microdata format (ods; xlsx). Available at: <https://www.gov.br/inep/pt-br/assuntos/noticias/enem/divulgados-microdados-do-enem-2022>. Accessed on: Apr. 6, 2026.

The year 2022 was chosen for being the most recent edition of the ENEM during the period in which this research was conducted. For analysis, the following socioeconomic variables of the participants were selected: type of school (public or private); school location (rural or urban); parents' level of education; parents' occupation; family income; and the scores obtained on the exam.

We conducted a subset of the data considering only students aged 17 to 19 who participated in ENEM-2022 in the state of Alagoas. This age subset was adopted because the categories within this age range showed a higher frequency rate (above 5%) in the dataset, after removing responses from participants who did not answer or selected the "I don't know" option in any of the categories of the socioeconomic variables used. Additionally, this subset allows for a qualitative analysis of a specific population segment, which has a stronger relationship with the indicators generated by socioeconomic characteristics based on dispositional theory and Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital. This age group (17 to 19 years) is particularly relevant because during this period, socialization with parents and school still plays a significant role in the formation of individuals' cultural capital. It is a crucial moment when young people are finishing high school and seeking to continue their studies through higher education, while at the same time beginning to consider entering the job market and becoming independent from family support for their livelihood. During this period, it is common for young people to receive encouragement and possible guidance from their families regarding the academic path to follow, which influences their choices and potential constraints. In any case, we conducted an MCA for verification using data from all age groups. We found that including individuals from other age groups in the analysis did not result in substantial differences compared to the results obtained in the analysis that included only participants aged 17 to 19.

Following these parameters, there remained records of 7,855 participants,⁵ which make up the *corpus* of this research. Although it is understood that gender categories interact or compete with social class dispositions, the gender and color categories of individuals were not considered for data extraction.⁶ The non-use of these categories was due to the high frequency of missing data, an aspect that affects the visualization of the data generated by the statistical method used in this research. However, we believe that a future effort focused on gender and race categories should be undertaken.

The categories related to parents' education, family income, and parents' and/or guardians' occupation were reorganized to ensure that all categories reached a frequency greater than 5%, with the exception of the categories "Rural School" (3.18%) and "Mother — Work Group 3" (4.8%), which were kept due to their relevance to the analyses of this study. The category addressing the occupation of participants' parents and/or guardians required a more detailed description. This is due to the limitations imposed on data processing by the way INEP grouped them, combining different types of occupations (in terms of their economic nature) within the same group. However, the use of the Brazilian Classification of Occupations (*Classificação Brasileira de Ocupações* — CBO), developed by the Ministry of Labor and Employment (*Ministério do Trabalho e Emprego* — MTE) (Brasil, 2010), allowed us to reorganize/reclassify the categories in a more precise, coherent, and collaborative manner for the intended analyses. These selected categories are intrinsically linked to the concepts of cultural and economic capital, allowing us to relate them, in light of Pierre Bourdieu's contributions, to performance on the ENEM.

The method used to calculate the participants' final average was based on the calculation carried out by the UFAL, as described in the admission term to the SISU for the 2023.1 academic

⁵ It is worth noting that none of the participants used in the analysis indicated being a "trainee," a term assigned to participants who are not yet eligible to enter higher education due to being too young or not being close (one year) to finishing high school.

⁶ Bourdieu also did not deepen his analysis by specifying these categories, not using them as part of his data (Silva, 1995).

period (Brasil, 2023b). This calculation consists of the arithmetic average of the sum of the scores obtained in the areas of knowledge, added to the essay score. To formulate qualitative indices on the participants' performance, the method of dividing the set of scores in quartiles,⁷ resulting in four parts/groups, each representing percentiles⁸ with 25% of the entire dataset, subdivided in ascending order from the lowest to the highest score. For classification of the groups, the plus (+) and minus (-) signs were used to represent, respectively, whether the groups/quartiles have a set of scores with higher or lower value. The data were organized based on 7,855 valid units.

In Chart 1 we present the performance indices and their respective legends used in the MCA.

Chart 1 – Performance indices generated from the quartilization of Enem scores (2022).

Quartile	Enem Score	Performance
1	257.9 to 479.10	Bad
2	479.10 to 541.36	Regular
3	541.36 to 604.60	Good
4	≥ to 604.60	Excellent

Median: 541.36; Mode: 525.20.

Source: Own elaboration.

To design the courses that individuals had the possibility of accessing through the SISU, we used the cutoff scores from the first call of those classified under open competition for the 109 courses offered by the UFAL in SISU-2023. In cases where courses were offered on more than one campus and/or shift, we used the average of their cutoff scores, which reduced the total number of courses to 53. Subsequently, we divided the set of cutoff score values into quartiles, organizing the courses into four groups in ascending order of cutoff scores, thus reflecting different levels of social prestige and competition. It is worth noting that, in 2023, the UFAL offered a total of 5,423 spots across 109 courses for the 47,759 applicants in SISU-2023. Chart 2 presents the result of the quartiles.

Chart 2 – Result of the median, mode, and quartiles of the first call cutoff score set (general competition) SISU (2023).

Valid		53
Median		605.34
Mode		496.88
Percentiles	1 st	0 to 565.32
	2 nd	565.33 to 605.34
	3 rd	605.35 to 651.06
	4 th	Above 651.06

Source: Own elaboration.

To achieve our objectives, we conducted a MCA, a statistical technique for geometrical data analysis that results in the projection of the so-called “point cloud” onto a two-dimensional plane.

⁷ Quartiles are the values that divide a data set into four equal parts.

⁸ Measure that divides the sample (in ascending order of the data) into one hundred parts, each with an approximately equal percentage of the data.

This analysis allows for the observation of the positions of individuals, categories, and their modalities on a graph, enabling an understanding of the dimensions that structure the affinities and contrasts between the categories included in the calculation (Bertoncello, 2022), more specifically allowing us a relational analysis of the socioeconomic characteristics of the ENEM-2022 participants and the performance they achieved on the exam. It is a technique that enables the examination of multiple influences simultaneously from a set of variables. Pierre Bourdieu was one of the sociologists who contributed to the diffusion of MCA in sociological analyses, as he saw it as a technique capable of helping to reconstruct social structures and the value relationships that underpin the social space, since the influences experienced by social agents are diverse and simultaneous.

We resort to the notion of social space to outline a field of competition that, in this context, concerns the transformation of cultural and economic capital into institutionalized cultural capital, as evidenced by performance on the 2022 ENEM. An individual who possesses this institutionalized capital can use it as a tool to enter higher education. Therefore, the ENEM emerges as a validator of a form of cultural capital that can later be converted into economic capital, impacting social stratification.

Inspired by Bourdieu's reflections, we conceptualize the variables "type of school," "school location," "parents' education," and "parents' occupation" as indicators of cultural capital. On the other hand, the variable "monthly family income" represents economic capital, while performance/score indexes on the ENEM are considered indicators of institutionalized/legitimized cultural capital. In this way, it became possible to explore, through MCA, how the variables and their categories relate to the active categories that structure the investigated space. The variables indicative of cultural capital were not limited to family aspects, as we recognize that individuals experience plural cultural universes that cannot be reduced to family culture, as Lahire (1998) highlighted.

ENEM-2022 AND THE RE(PRO)DUCTION OF SOCIAL INEQUALITIES IN ALAGOAS

In this section, the results of the MCA and its graphical representations will be presented, aiming to observe the correlations between cultural and economic capital and ENEM scores.

Table 1 presents the quantifications of frequencies, contributions, and coordinates of the categories in the MCA. The contributions indicate the rate at which categories contribute to the inertia of the axis, while the coordinates explain the positions of the categories within the axis, allowing the identification of association relationships (same signs) or opposition (opposite signs) between the categories within the axis. We highlight in bold the categories with contributions above the average (0.035) and the coordinates of the categories that have a strong oppositional relationship.

Table 1 – Quantifications of variable categories on axes 1 and 2.

Variable / Category	Frequency	Contribution		Coordinates	
		Axis 1	Axis 2	Axis 1	Axis 2
Type of school					
Public	5,212	0.042	0.001	-0.507	-0.046
Private	2,643	0.082	0.001	0.999	0.091
School location					
Rural	250	0.009	0.004	-1.058	0.491
Urban	7,605	0.000	0.000	0.035	-0.016

Continue...

Table 1 – Continuation.

Variable / Category	Frequency	Contribution		Coordinates	
		Axis 1	Axis 2	Axis 1	Axis 2
Father's education					
No elementary education	1,843	0.058	0.063	-1.001	0.752
Elementary school	2,050	0.010	0.029	-0.4	-0.481
High school	2,450	0.007	0.048	0.3	-0.573
Higher education	1,512	0.077	0.040	1.277	0.663
Mother's education					
No elementary education	1,087	0.047	0.071	-1.173	1.042
Elementary school	1,799	0.024	0.007	-0.658	-0.259
High school	2,591	0.000	0.063	0.017	-0.635
Higher education	2,378	0.076	0.024	1.016	0.411
Father's occupation					
Agricultural, forestry, and fishing workers	1,695	0.060	0.120	-1.068	1.083
Service workers; retail salespersons in stores and markets; administrative service workers	1,735	0.004	0.064	-0.285	-0.78
Workers in repair and maintenance services; workers in the production of industrial goods and services	1,726	0.003	0.062	-0.246	-0.774
Members of the armed forces and military personnel; senior members of the government; leaders of public organizations and companies; managers; professionals in science and the arts; mid-level technicians	2,699	0.086	0.016	1.011	0.316
Mother's occupation					
Agricultural, forestry, and fishing workers	1,470	0.063	0.118	-1.168	1.152
Service workers; retail salespeople in stores and markets; administrative service workers	2,949	0.012	0.091	-0.356	-0.717
Workers in repair and maintenance services; workers in the production of industrial goods and services	328	0.001	0.016	-0.24	-0.894
Members of the armed forces and military personnel; senior members of the government; leaders of public organizations and companies; managers; professionals in science and the arts; mid-level technicians	3,108	0.081	0.010	0.916	0.23

Continue...

Table 1 – Continuation.

Variable / Category	Frequency	Contribution		Coordinates	
		Axis 1	Axis 2	Axis 1	Axis 2
Monthly family income					
Up to 1 minimum wage	3,141	0.070	0.010	-0.844	0.233
From 1 to 2 minimum wages	2,075	0.000	0.062	-0.062	-0.704
From 2 to 5 minimum wages	1,691	0.033	0.001	0.791	-0.09
Greater than or equal to 5 minimum wages	948	0.068	0.050	1.521	0.931
Enem Performance					
Bad	1,966	0.032	0.005	-0.725	0.215
Regular	1,964	0.006	0.003	-0.303	-0.156
Good	1,962	0.001	0.012	0.144	-0.325
Excellent	1,963	0.048	0.008	0.885	0.266

Source: Own elaboration.

In this way, we seek to understand with due emphasis the antagonism generated between the modalities, according to their positions within the factorial plane formed by axes 1 and 2 (positive or negative coordinates), and their proximities. This allows us to grasp the relationships between objectified cultural capital, economic capital, and institutionalized cultural capital (grades), which is reflected in variable conditions for competing for space in higher education.

The result of the MCA, which encompasses all the categories mentioned in Chart 1, shows that axis 1 explains 51.06% of the inertia (that is, the possible combinations between the variables and modalities), while axis 2 explains 26.39%, totaling 77.45%. It is observed that axis 1 is the one that best describes the potential relationships among the analyzed variables.

Chart 3 presents the category abbreviations to facilitate visualization and optimize space in Figure 1 generated by the MCA.

Through the social space depicted in Figure 1, we generally observe a negative association between the modalities that represent a higher possession of cultural capital and those that represent the opposite. This indicates that the more frequent the categories located in the positive coordinates of axis 1, the less frequent the modalities located in the negative coordinates of the same axis. These associations distribute the modalities in such a way that we can consider the positive side of axis 1 as “+ cultural capital” and the negative side as “- cultural capital.” The categories closest to the center of the graph are the most common, while those farthest from the center are rarer. Furthermore, the distances between the points indicate the degree of correspondence (positive) between them: the closer they are, the stronger the relationship; the farther apart, the weaker the relationship.

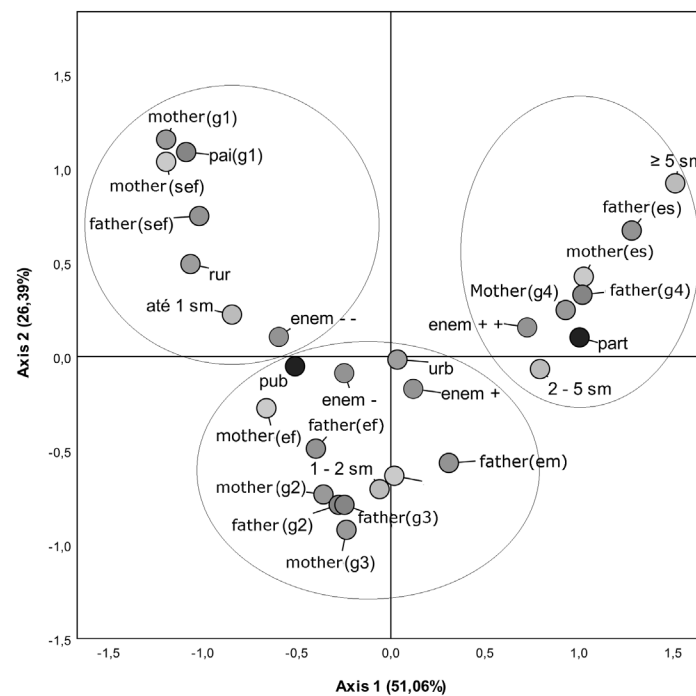
We can observe that the negative coordinates on axis 1 are associated with categories where there is a higher number of individuals with lower performance on the ENEM. These are generally from public schools, have a family monthly income of up to one minimum wage, are children of workers in occupations with lower social prestige and economic return, and have education levels up to elementary school. On the other hand, the positive coordinates concentrate a higher number of individuals with better performance on the ENEM, generally from urban private schools, with a family monthly income above two minimum wages, the children of parents with occupations of higher prestige and economic return, and with education levels from high school onwards. These data

become even more concerning when we consider that many students without cultural and economic capital did not register for or attend the exam. As noted by Macedo and Saporetti (2023), when examining the ENEM data from 2019 and 2020, the students who registered but did not attend the exam were predominantly from public schools, of Brown/mixed-race background, without access to

Chart 3 – Abbreviations of variable/category names.

Variables / Categories	Abbreviation
Type of school	
Public	pub
Private	part
School location	
Rural	rur
Urban	urb
Parents' education	
No elementary education	sef
Elementary school	ef
High school	em
Higher education	es
Parents' occupation	
Agricultural, forestry, and fishing workers	g1
Service workers; retail salespeople in stores and markets; administrative service workers	g2
Workers in repair and maintenance services; workers in the production of industrial goods and services	g3
Members of the armed forces and military personnel; senior members of the government; leaders of public organizations and companies, managers; professionals in science and the arts; mid-level technicians	g4
Monthly family income	
Up to 1 minimum wage	até 1 sm
From 1 to 2 minimum wages	1 – 2 sm
From 2 to 5 minimum wages	2 – 5 sm
Greater than or equal to 5 minimum wages	≥ 5 sm
Enem Performance	
Bad	enem - -
Regular	enem -
Good	enem +
Excellent	enem + +

Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 1 – Categories of the variables projected onto the factorial plane formed by axes 1 and 2.

Source: Own elaboration.

a car or computer at home, and with a family income of no more than two minimum wages. Although the COVID-19 pandemic impacted all Brazilian students, its effects were more severe for those in situations of economic and social vulnerability (Macedo and Saporetti, 2023). However, this situation was not limited to the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, as previous research conducted by Barros *et al.* (2019), which examined the ENEM editions from 2011 to 2017, had already identified that individuals belonging to the lower socioeconomic strata had a diminished presence in the total pool of participants. This supports the assertion that the popular classes “experience their disadvantage as a personal fate” (Bourdieu and Passeron, 2018, p. 95), since the influence of the family environment and social context tends to discourage ambitions perceived as excessive (Bourdieu, 2015a), with access to higher education being understood as something unattainable.

In addition to the divergences highlighted by the coordinates of the categories, we can identify associations between the categories and their proximities, revealing three distinct groupings (outlined by the ellipses in the graph). The two groupings located at the positive and negative extremes of axis 1 represent less common categories, with lower frequency and a pronounced opposition relationship.

In the grouping of negative coordinates on axis 1, we predominantly find individuals with the lowest ENEM scores, coming from lower-income families and whose parents have lower levels of education, including workers mainly in the agricultural, forestry, and fishing areas. On the other hand, in the ellipse located at the positive end of axis 1, we see a greater number of individuals with the highest ENEM scores, coming from private schools, with higher family income and whose parents have higher academic education, many of whom hold prestigious positions and have greater economic returns.

Given the scarcity of these categories and the clear divergence between them, it is possible to reinforce Bourdieu’s statement (2015a, p. 55), which highlights “the influence of the family environment and social context, which tend to discourage ambitions perceived as excessive and always more or less suspected of rejecting one’s origins.” The discrepancies between these social

groups underscore the need for greater efforts on the part of less privileged individuals to access higher education (Bourdieu, 2015b). In the case of individuals from more advantaged classes, even if they achieve low results, they have more and better opportunities to access higher education through other means, such as admission through entrance exams at higher education institutions. In this sense, socially privileged groups show less dependence on cultural capital for the acquisition of economic capital.

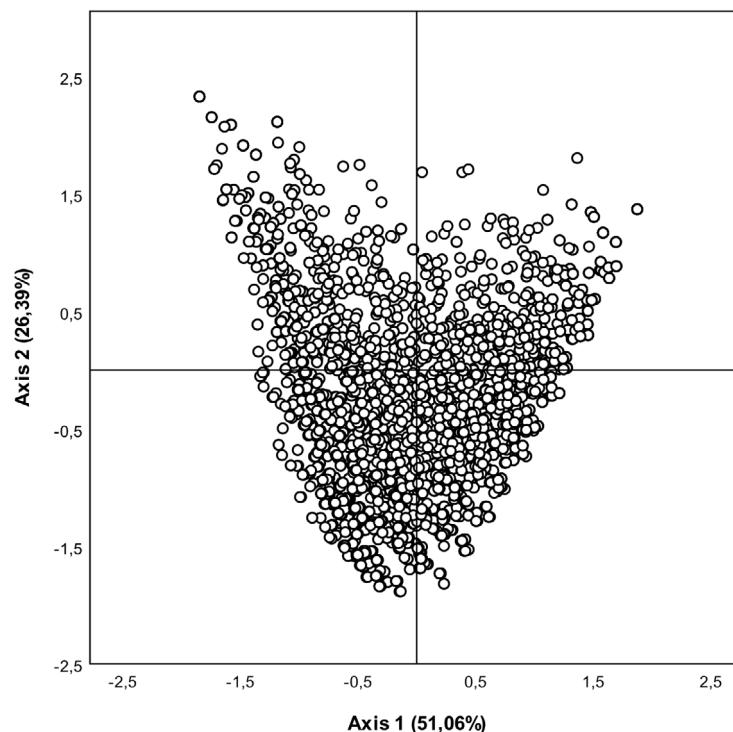
In the central ellipse of the chart, we find the most common profiles, representing the most frequent population group in ENEM-2023. These individuals, for the most part, show intermediate performance (between positive and negative in ENEM), attended public (urban) schools, have a family income of up to two minimum wages, and are the children of wage-earners, such as retail salespeople, administrative service providers, or those involved in the production of goods and services, with academic education at the elementary or high school level.

As Bourdieu (2015b) highlighted, for a family to be able to provide conditions that enable and/or help in their children's academic success, there needs to be at least a perspective of success, a horizon to be envisioned. This situation is dramatic, as we cannot ignore that a large number of young people deprived of economic and cultural capital do not even manage to register for the exam.

The test results corroborate the findings of previous studies, such as those by Carmo, Heckler, and Carvalho (2020), Torres *et al.* (2020), Jaloto and Primi (2021), Rocha *et al.* (2022), Souza *et al.* (2022), and Faillace, Britto, and Costa (2023), which identified significant correlations between parents' socioeconomic profile, the type of school attended, and performance on previous editions of the ENEM exams. These findings highlight the ongoing reproduction of social inequalities through cultural capital institutionalized by the State.

Understanding the importance of a clear visualization of the distribution of individuals on the factorial plane resulting from the MCA, we provide in Figure 2 a graphical representation of the points corresponding to each individual.

Figure 2 – Cloud of individuals projected onto the factorial plane formed by axes 1 and 2.



Source: Own elaboration.

To visualize the possible opportunities for individuals to access courses through SISU-2023 (first call/open competition), if they participated in the selection process, we will first present in Chart 4 the quantifications and groupings resulting from the division of the cutoff scores into quartiles, along with their respective prestige/competition indicators. Next, in Figure 3, we will present a histogram of the scores obtained by individuals, highlighting with lines the intervals corresponding to each quartile generated by the division of the cutoff scores in the courses offered by the UFAL.

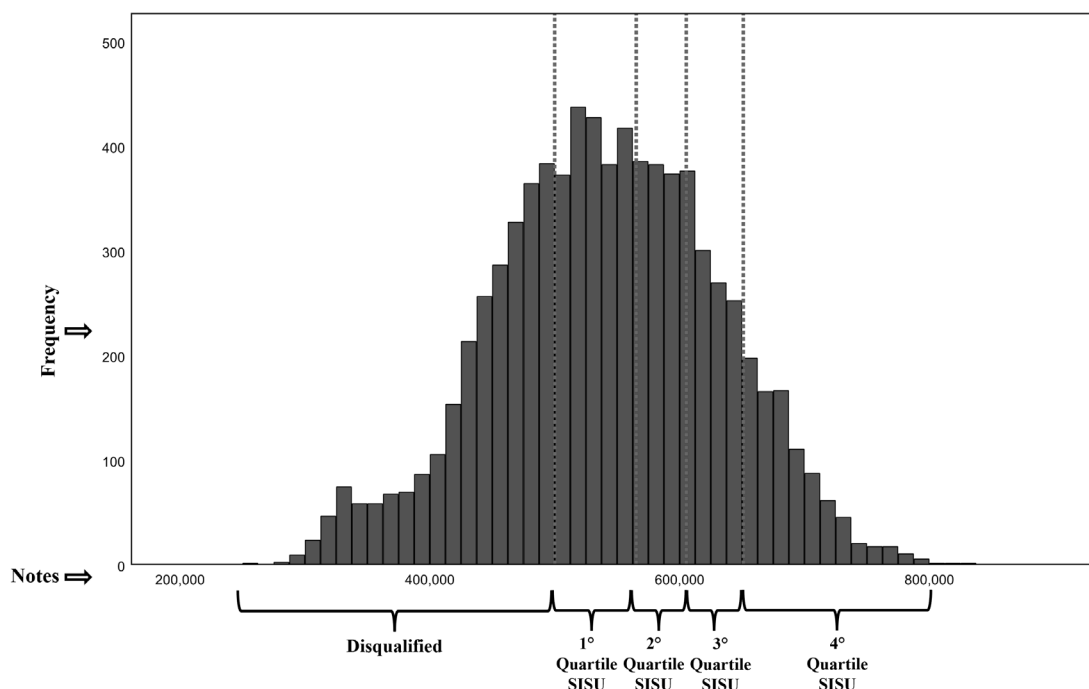
Chart 4 – Ranking of courses based on the quartile distribution of the Unified Selection System (SISU) cutoff scores (2023) at the Federal University of Alagoas (UFAL).

Quartile	Cutoff scores (Interval)	Courses	Course Prestige/ Competition
	From 257.90 to 496.87	Disqualified	
1 st	From 496.88 to 565.32	Dance; Physics; Chemistry; Tourism; Surveying Engineering; Library Science; Geography; Languages — Spanish; Forestry Engineering; Languages — French; Journalism; Meteorology; Agroecology.	Minimum
2 nd	From 565.33 to 605.34	Energy Engineering; Economic Sciences; Agronomy; Environmental and Sanitary Engineering; Technological and Industrial Chemistry; History; Social Work; Production Engineering; Animal Science; Pedagogy; Theater; Philosophy; Social Sciences; Fisheries Engineering.	Low
3 rd	From 605.35 to 651.06	Administration; Public Administration; Chemical Engineering; Petroleum Engineering; Electrical Engineering; Physical Education; Accounting; English Language and Literature; Mathematics; Public Relations; Biological Sciences; Information Systems; Portuguese Language and Literature.	Moderate
4 th	≥ 651.07	Medicine; Dentistry; Nursing; Veterinary Medicine; Psychology; Law; Computer Science; Architecture and Urbanism; Computer Engineering; Nutrition; Pharmacy; Civil Engineering; Design.	High

Source: Own elaboration.

The data presented in Chart 4 and Figure 3 indicate that individuals with lower performance on the ENEM (enem - - / enem -), who, according to the MCA results, have a lower accumulation of capital, would be disqualified from all courses or would only have access to courses with minimal prestige/competition (1st quartile). Furthermore, a significant number of disqualified individuals is evident, which is equivalent to the number of “qualified” individuals in the first three quartiles.

Figure 3 – Crossing the distribution of scores obtained in the 2022 National High School Exam (ENEM) with the quartiles generated by the quartilization of the cutoff scores of the Unified Selection System — SISU (2023) for courses at the Federal University of Alagoas (UFAL).



Source: Own elaboration.

The results highlight that individuals from Alagoas, endowed with cultural capital acquired through different sources, have their chances of obtaining institutional cultural capital increased. This institutional cultural capital, in turn, enables access to more prestigious courses, which can be converted into economic capital in the future. In summary, the social origin of Alagoas residents is strongly related to the amount of cultural capital accumulated, directly influencing their performance on the ENEM. This performance, in turn, determines their ability to enter university, earn a degree, and consequently access the job market. Therefore, there is a clear relationship between social origin and the perpetuation of the current social stratification in Alagoas.

In summary, the analysis of the data presented in Figures 1 and 3 suggests a strong association between better results on the ENEM and belonging to the middle and upper classes. Children of parents with degrees, higher family income, and attendees of private schools appear to have greater chances of entering the most competitive courses offered by the UFAL. It is important to highlight that these courses are generally associated with liberal professions, such as those in medicine, psychology, nursing, law, dentistry, and pharmacy, which offer the possibility of working independently (as freelancers). In this context of Alagoas, the perpetuation of the class structure and the privileges derived from the institutionalization of cultural capital become evident.

In this way, the MCA conducted with socioeconomic data and ENEM scores reveals aspects that highlight the potential reproduction of social inequalities. It becomes evident who the holders of economic capital are, who are capable of acquiring institutionalized cultural capital, represented by the exam score, and, consequently, of converting this capital into access to higher education in Alagoas (enrollment in the course), with greater chances of later transforming it into economic capital (through entry into the labor market).

To achieve the democratization of access to higher education, test results highlight the importance of the State facilitating the acquisition of goods that allow the incorporation of cultural capital, both for parents and for students, even before their participation in the ENEM. Furthermore, it is essential to reassess the knowledge valued in the national exam as key criteria for entering higher education, taking into account the diverse social and cultural backgrounds of young people. However, it is important to note that the ways of acquiring cultural capital are not automatic with access to cultural goods. For example, the possession of computers does not necessarily translate into the transmission of cultural capital, and may be limited to legal ownership of the equipment, since “cultural capital is a having that has become a being, a property that has become embodied and has become an integral part of the ‘person,’ a ‘habitus’” (Bourdieu, 2015b, p. 83). This means that “cultural capital is transmitted only at the cost of a considerable expenditure of time, and an implicit criterion of cultural hierarchies is the duration of the time of acquisition” (Bourdieu, 2023, p. 223).

Finally, we highlight that the ENEM, at least in the case of Alagoas, is a state instrument that helps mask a false notion of democratic access, concealing three aspects: it operates in converting incorporated cultural capital into institutionalized cultural capital, reinforcing the disadvantage of students who have not had access to objectified cultural capital throughout their school and extracurricular lives; it hides the state’s inability to provide higher education to everyone, shifting the responsibility or blame for access to higher education onto the students; and it legitimizes the heirs of institutionalized capital, contributing to the reproduction of educational and social inequalities.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The results obtained highlight the need to build pathways that lead the less privileged classes to higher education, overcoming the multiple layers of inequality that permeate the differences between social classes in Alagoas. Furthermore, it is crucial to recognize the strategies and forms of domination employed by the more privileged classes to maintain their social position and perpetuate social inequalities. In this context, this research emphasizes that an effective policy for access to institutionalized cultural capital should include programs aimed at access to objectified cultural capital. This implies not only ensuring quality education but also involving students’ parents, providing them with conditions and incentives to cultivate an ethos (what Bourdieu called *conatus*⁹) in their children that motivates them to seek access to university and social advancement.

We also observe the relevance of cultural capital in the perpetuation of this structure. Although the ENEM is designed as an exam that supposedly offers equal opportunities to its participants, it becomes evident that the chances of advancement through institutionalized cultural capital, legitimized by the exam, are not based solely on meritocracy. In fact, attributing “merit” would be fairer for the few participants from less privileged classes who manage to achieve good results; these are exceptions to the rule. This is due to the fact that young people from lower social strata often need to secure their livelihood even before completing high school, which puts them at a disadvantage by having less time and resources to acquire the necessary cultural capital.

It is important to emphasize that the 2022 ENEM took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in students with fewer economic and cultural resources not taking the exam (Macedo and Saporetto, 2023). This implies that the presented data may underestimate the identified problem

9 Tendency to pass on an inheritance (of capital of all kinds) in a way that is not necessarily conscious (therefore, Bourdieu does not call it a project, but a *conatus*, a concept borrowed from Spinoza).

of the reproduction of inequalities in access to the institutionalized cultural capital necessary to enter higher education.

This brief excerpt on the acquisition of institutionalized capital for access to higher education in Alagoas through the ENEM shows that, despite policies aimed at mitigating the effects of social inequalities, the ENEM continues to be a tool for legitimizing these disparities. It is crucial that these socially established and institutionalized structures be subjected to analysis and investigation, and that their results be reflected in the social sphere. This allows us to identify and examine the foundations that sustain social inequalities, depriving some of opportunities to accumulate cultural capital and legitimizing others, who are already privileged, through the ideology of meritocracy. As pointed out by Phillip Brown (1990), we are facing a parentocratic system, in which students' academic success is increasingly less associated with their own merit and personal effort, and increasingly dependent on their parents' financial resources and strategic ability to promote their educational competitiveness.

Although this research focused on the ENEM-2022 participants in the state of Alagoas, the data found corroborate the statistical tests presented by Silva *et al.* (2020) and Faillace, Britto, and Costa (2023), which indicate that the ENEM has been insufficient to promote changes in the structures of social stratification. However, as Bourdieu (1983) aptly pointed out:

The knowledge of social laws is a condition for any transformation of the social world. No one ever thought of criticizing Galileo for destroying the dream of flight; on the contrary, it is precisely because Galileo discovered the law of gravity that we were able to fly. In any case, it is to the extent that we understand the laws by which cultural capital is transmitted from one generation to another that we have some chance of partially suspending the effects of these mechanisms.

We believe that the reflections presented here contribute to overcoming the limitations of the ENEM by revealing and critically analyzing them. Considering the urgency to mitigate social inequalities, the analyses emphasize the importance of public policies that facilitate access for young people and their families to the cultural capital necessary for good performance in higher education entrance exams. Moreover, an evaluation model that takes into account the historical, socioeconomic, and geographical context of the individuals being assessed, valuing their personal experiences, could be a more effective approach in the pursuit of equity in higher education access. This approach requires reflection on the culturally arbitrary nature of dominant social classes and a reassessment of the knowledge that should be valued in the evaluation process. In this way — perhaps — it might be possible to break with the 'ideology of meritocracy' present in the ENEM discourse, which masks its impacts on the perpetuation of social inequalities, legitimizing and naturalizing this condition.

The results presented here do not ignore the importance of the ENEM and SISU, since, as Bourdieu and Passeron (2018, p. 93) pointed out, "the school policy of popular democracies may tend to systematically favor the entry into higher education and examination success of the children of workers and farmers. But the effort of equalization remains formal as long as inequalities are not effectively abolished by pedagogical action."

The limitations of this research prevent us from examining the trajectories of students to better understand the objectified and embodied capitals of students with the best and worst results. However, it provides evidence that highlights the need for further efforts to, for example, investigate which elements of urban and family environments have contributed to the incorporation of the cultural capital required in the ENEM.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

CRISTIANO DAS NEVES BODART holds a PhD in Sociology from the Universidade de São Paulo (USP). He is a professor at the Center for Education and the Postgraduate Program in Sociology at the Universidade Federal de Alagoas (UFAL).

DAVID TYRONE SANTOS COIMBRA holds a degree in Social Sciences from the Universidade Federal de Alagoas (UFAL).

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Responsible Editor: Terezinha Oliveira  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5349-1059>