



# Social trajectory of students from a public preparatory course for selection to university<sup>1</sup>

## *Trajatória social de alunos de um curso pré-vestibular popular*

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### Abstract

The aim of the research that originated this article was the analysis of the social trajectory of students from a public preparatory course and the verification of their expectations about higher education. Data collection was based on a questionnaire with open and closed-ended questions and a semi-structured interview, based on the models

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<sup>1</sup> Translation by Lilian Francisco.

used by Muzzetti (1997). Data were analyzed by the elaboration of thematic charts. Based on the researches conducted by Pierre Bourdieu (1997, 2007), this research concluded that the students understand that schooling is, besides being a viable alternative in the search for social ascension, the redeeming of social ills. Profession choice based on natural talent or divine gift generate expectations which attest the lack of knowledge about the school system by students and their parents, which is reinforced by the belief in opportunity equality.

**Keywords:** Social trajectory. Public preparatory course. *Habitus*.

### **Resumo**

*O objetivo da pesquisa que originou este artigo foi analisar a trajetória social de alunos e alunas de um curso pré-vestibular popular e verificar suas expectativas sobre o Ensino Superior. Foram utilizados na coleta dos dados questionário com questões abertas e fechadas e entrevista semiestruturada, elaborados com base nos modelos utilizados por Muzzetti (1997). Os dados foram analisados a partir da elaboração de quadros temáticos. Apoiada nas pesquisas realizadas por Pierre Bourdieu (1997, 2007), essa pesquisa concluiu que os estudantes entendem que a escolarização é, além de uma alternativa viável na busca pela ascensão social, a redentora dos males sociais. A escolha da profissão pela crença no talento natural ou por um dom divino gera expectativas que atestam o desconhecimento do sistema de ensino pelos estudantes e por seus pais, o que é reforçado pela crença na igualdade de oportunidades.*

**Palavras-chave:** Trajetória social. Curso pré-vestibular popular. *Habitus*.

### **Introduction**

The research that originated this article sought to verify the expectations of students from a public preparatory course, who are from a small town in the interior of Sao Paulo State, Brazil, through their social trajectory analysis. For this work fulfillment, we have used the theoretical reference developed by Pierre Bourdieu. For the French sociologist,

trajectory is understood as “a series of positions successive occupied by the same agent (or the same group) in a space that it is the transformation himself, being subjected to unceasing transformations” (BORDIEU, 1996, p. 189). Therefore, we start from the social trajectory analysis of the researched agents to aim the choices and expectations in face of the educational system and the school market.

During this decade, many works (SETTON, 2005; PIOTTO, 2008) problematized what was defined as atypical cases, exceptional trajectories, or else, according to Zago (2006), school longevity in lower classes. Starting from the trajectory of public university students who come from lower classes and without family history of admission to higher education, some of these studies understand entrance exams approval and registration as a school success. In disregard of what was defined by Bourdieu and Champagne (1997) as interior exclusion, where the ingress in a school level never reached by the family can represent an improvement in the material conditions of existence, even if it does not necessarily represent social ascension. For Zago (2006), such interpretations of the so called “school success” of lower classes, understood only as admission to higher education, only reduce the problem and its understanding not taking into consideration the reason why the agent searched for an enrollment in a university. According to Rocha (1995, p. 18), what the student wants in the entrance exams is the possibility of exercising, in the future, a “profession officially recognized as distinct”.

## **The research**

For data collection, conducted in August and September, 2007, we used a questionnaire with open and closed-ended questions and a semi-structured interview, based on the model used by Muzzetti (1997). It was possible to obtain through the questionnaire a social-economical panel of the group and the definition of the sampling type

to be used in the interviews. Nineteen students present in the classroom for consecutive days were invited and they accepted to participate in the research answering the questionnaire, from which we obtained that the average family income was R\$ 988.00 and their parents school background was of: 2.5% of illiterate, 61.5% with primary education, 18% with junior high education, 13% with high school and 5% with higher education.

Through the data obtained with the questionnaire, we opted for the convenience sample, because we observed a relative homogeneity in the variables: parents school background (predominance of primary educational) and income (not superior to R\$ 1,400.00 per family). Five students were selected for the interviews; they are named here as Agents A–E:

Agent A – female, 17 years old, her father is a painter and tinsmith who finished high school, her mother is elementary school teacher;  
Agent B – male, 18 years old, his father is a tractor driver who studied until the fourth grade of elementary school, his mother is a housewife who studied through second grade of elementary school;  
Agent C – male, 18 years old, his father is a hydroelectric operator who completed primary education, his mother is a maid who studied until the fourth grade of elementary school;  
Agent D – female, 17 years old, her father is a municipal official who studied until the second year of high school, her mother is a municipal official who concluded primary education;  
Agent E – male, 17 years old, his father is a tractor driver who studied until the fifth grade of elementary school, his mother is a clerk who completed primary education.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis following methodological indications presented by Bourdieu (1997; 2007). Data were disposed in thematic charts for analysis, in which the researched agents' answers were compared. A comparison was also done

with the results obtained in other researches with students of lower classes (PIOTTO, 2008; ZAGO, 1998).

## Social trajectory

The researched students attended a public preparatory course linked to a public university and they are from a city with about 9,000 inhabitants. With a predominantly agricultural economy, with strong dependence of the sugar-alcohol sector, this small town does not have technical courses or higher education, only a high school. There are no bookstores (new and old books) or music stores and the only existing library is located inside the high school.

In order for attending the classes, the students used to travel 47 kilometers between their hometown and Araraquara city, their regional pole. Transportation was provided their hometown's City Hall and the classes were in the evening. Some students used to go from their hometown to Araraquara twice a day. The five interviewed teenagers defined the public preparatory course choice as:

*Because I needed to prepare more for the entrance exams and I also [...] had good information about the course. I said 'I will do the test, if I pass, I will do' (Agent A).*

*Because the course is good and it is also, as people say, a community course (Agent B).*

*I have chosen it because it is a social project. It opened a life perspective beyond what I knew and it taught me some things that I hadn't learnt yet (Agent C).*

*Because I have a friend who has taken the course and he could pass the entrance exam; then, he indicated it to me (Agent D).*

*Because it is public and I cannot afford another one and due to the fact that I have heard good things about it (Agent E).*

For Zago (2006), the choice of the preparatory course (public or not) is a strategy that aims to fulfill basic education gaps, according to the agents' reasons which were reported here. In order for us to understand the perception these teenagers have about a certain "educational flaw", it is necessary for us to be aware of the capital possessions the agents and their families have. We are going to show some data about this group's cultural capital, social capital and economical capital possession.

Bourdieu (2002, p. 74, author's emphasis) shows us three cultural capital states:

[...] in the *incorporated state*, that is, under the form of durable dispositions of the organism; in the *aimed state*, under the form of cultural assets — pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines, which constitute signs or the fulfillment of theories or of critics of these theories, of issues etc.; and, thus, in the *institutionalized state*, objectivation form that is necessary to set apart because, as it is observed in its relation to *school certificate*, it grants the cultural capital — of which it is, supposedly, the guarantee — entirely original properties.

Thus, we can conclude that the interviewed agents' parents have a low cultural capital, which can be verified by their institutionalized state.

*My mother "is" higher education and my father is until the third grade of high school. Because he did not want it (Agent A).*

*My father has until the fourth grade of junior high school and my mother until the second grade of junior high school. Difficulty from when they were younger (Agent B).*

*My father for working reasons and my mother too, she had a time when she worked when she was younger, so she did not have so many opportunities for studying (Agent C).*

*My father because he had to work very early and he could not finish and my mother I think it was because of that too (Agent D).*

*My father is until the fifth, my mother, the eighth. It is because they got married very young and abandoned (Agent E).*

Agent A's mother, elementary education teacher, has a higher education degree and she concluded Management and Letters courses, taken in private universities located in cities nearby.

As for social capital, the interviewed agents and their families have relationships that are restricted to their class. Therefore, friendship is restricted to work environment and neighborhood. The agents and families' relationship net is constituted by professionals with low incomes and little recognition, such as: sugarcane cutters, salespeople, public employees and tractor drivers. That is, they are mostly manual laborers and people with low professionalization, characterizing a relationship net with low social capital by the interviewed agents and their families. As for the family income — Agent A (father, mother and one son), Agent B (father, mother and four children), Agent C (father, mother and one son), Agent D (father, mother and three children), Agent E (father, mother and two children — the teenagers answered:

*There, counting only with my mother's, this depends on how many classes she takes in the beginning of the year. This year is around five hundred to eight hundred reais. Only my mother's we count (Agent A).*

*One thousand two hundred reais (Agent B).*

*My family income per person gets until two hundred eighty, three hundred reais (Agent C).*

*One thousand one hundred reais (Agent D).*

*Look, it is four hundred thirty [father]. My mother is fifty per week. (Agent E).*

Therefore, we can conclude that, in this class, there is low capital possession. This makes the students see through the public preparatory course a real possibility of being admitted to public higher

education, being, thus, an educational strategy. On the other hand, the families do not preview schooling until higher education, as well as they do not preview social ascension through schooling, not going beyond an “empty cultural good will” of the interviewed ones’ parents. (BOURDIEU, 2002, p. 55), as we will see following. In this *field* the access opportunities to cultural activities or possessions are restricted or null. As said by the interviewed agents, their grandparents and parents were/are part of the same *field*, which explains this homogeneity in their answers. Their social relations (social capital) and their access to cultural capital are rooted in the field to which they belong and in their low economical capital, which makes this rupture with low school background more difficult and this incorporation of symbolic capitals in the *habitus* something painful.

### School route

We have found in the first phase of the agents’ schooling a set of information that, not coincidentally, makes the studied group homogeneous. In this period of schooling none of the agents changed schools. The interviewed people reported a good relationship with the other students and with the teachers and a great school performance. During junior high school (5th to 8th grades) three of five interviewed people had to change schools. One of the interviewed ones moved to another city and two of them changed due to vacancy regionalization at schools according to the neighborhood. First student’s parents, who were unemployed, moved to another city due to a job offer. The agents attended high school in the same state school, the only one in the city to offer this kind of education. From the interviewed people, only one changed schools, taking half of high school in a nearby city, where his father got a job. This family stayed in the other city for only a year, going back to their hometown. Only one female student complained about the relationship with teachers, saying it was awful, because,



according to her “*the teachers did not give them attention, we also did not have much interest, the direction did not collaborate in anything*” (Agent A). All of them said they had a good relationship, in this period, with the other students and a good performance. According to Piotto (2008, p.707), success in the initial and intermediary years of schooling contributes “to the construction of senses, dispositions and practices that tended to reinforce them, making them an important base to studying continuity”.

Public schools for these students is an inferior school comparing to private schools. From the interviewed ones, two complained about the education offered by public schools, and all of the interviewed people said that they attended public schools due to the family low income. This factor made it impossible to attend private schools which were so aimed by them. There were no failures among the interviewed people and no problems in the relationship with the other students during school trajectory.

### **Inheritance strategies and contradictions**

Reproduction strategies can be understood as conscious or unconscious actions done by the agents who ultimately aim to keep or improve their position or of a certain social group in class structure. These strategies can be divided in two groups: maintenance strategies that aim to guarantee only the permanence of the family in the position occupied in the social hierarchy; and reconversion strategies, i.e., reconverting the possessed capitals aiming the maintenance — when the present position is threatened — or, more commonly, the elevation in the social hierarchy. Firstly, the strategies are decided by the family in order to guarantee their reproduction. These reproduction strategies — of fertility, marriage, inheritance, economical, educational etc. (BOURDIEU; BOLTANSKI; SAINT-MARTIN, 1978) — are put in practice according to success probabilities seen and felt by the agents, being that the members of a class are prone to reproduce in their children their condition and position.

We have that the interviewed agents and their families use some strategies that aim to increase their economical capital and, thus, improve the position in social structure. Interviewed agents' parents seek, with their children education, to break with their own past, as parents' main will is that their children "do not pass by what they have passed", according to one of the interviewed agents, that is, that the children get a reasonable job which gives them material conditions that their parents could not give them. The members of a class are prone to reproduce all their properties, or "to operate a reconversion" (BOURDIEU; BOLTANSKI; SAINT-MARTIN, 1978, p. 160). This is determined by the evaluation of probabilities, both in the ascension and in the maintenance of the present position. These probabilities increase as the number of years studied increases.

The main strategy used by the interviewed agents is the educational strategy. The use of this strategy by the interviewed agents and their families has both a reproductive character and a reconversion one. Three of the agents attend technical course in the morning. Only two students said they attend technical course aiming professionalization and employment:

*For the moment, while I do not enter the university. For me to professionalize (Agent B).*

*Yes. I took it to professionalize at work, in the area I work today (Agent C).*

When they aim to guarantee employment through technical courses they do not necessarily aim social ascension. At this point, we have that educational strategy is here used by the agents as a reproductive strategy, because they are restricted to the possibilities seen and sensed by the agents and their families in the labor market.

As observed, different from attending technical courses that aims employment, the admission to higher education is seen as the right way to obtain social ascension. In the search for passing the entrance exams and the later admission to the university, as well as the search for social ascension, agents and their families use the reconversion strategy, which in this specific

case is also an educational strategy, that are “nothing but a set of permanent actions and reactions from which each group make efforts to maintain or change their position in the social structure” (BOURDIEU; BOLTANSKI; SAINT-MARTIN, 1978, p. 175). As said before, this strategy can be noticed in the school trajectory of the interviewed agents and in the stimulus and effort the parents had in maintaining and supporting their children during school track. The five interviewed students’ parents have always been present in school meetings, helped with homework as much as possible, verified the works done at school, bought school material even when the resources were scarce and have always presented school for their children as a way of changing their lives.

These strategies, which do not have foundation in an educational system knowledge, are what Bourdieu (2002, p. 55) calls “empty cultural good will”, as these families do not have enough or necessary cultural capital to help their children in an effective way. Consequently, these agents are restricted to the legitimate cultural capital transmitted by school, that is, cultural privilege action noticed in the parents’ recommendations, information and attitudes before the educational system (BORDIEU, 2002).

The strategies, used by the family, designed in this present work as “empty cultural will”, even with limited symbolic capitals (cultural, social capitals and others), played the role of main factor in the children’s seek for study continuity, as said by Bourdieu (2002, p. 50). For Nogueira and Nogueira (2002), these families notice that the success chances are restricted, because they lack the resources necessary for a good school performance. On the other hand, the uncertainty would increase due to the educational investment return being given in a long time, that is, these families would be less inclined to such investment.

Therefore, the research revealed that the educational strategy is used as a strategy to maintain the social position, but it is also used as a reconversion strategy. When they aim the entrance in the labor market through the technical level formation, they do not reconvert their capitals and wait with this to only guarantee employment. On the other hand, when they seek for higher education, they use the educational strategy to

reconvert their capitals in the search for a social position improvement. For that, they dedicate time and receive stimulus from their parents, translated into empty cultural good will and in the investment of little amounts of money in coloring books, educational games and other more immediate necessities that have appeared during their school trajectories.

### The expectations

Among the interviewed students, the opinions about which higher education courses have prestige coincide in one point: prestigious courses are the ones that they would try to take. The motivations that take them to try a vacancy in a certain course are:

*It is something that I always liked, since I was little I have always been interested more in the sciences area and I admire some professions that are related to the sciences area (Agent A).*

*I like sciences and mechanics (Agent B).*

*The reasons are due to the fact that I identify with the course and I already know a lot about the course, mainly as mathematics and chemistry that are areas that I like (Agent C).*

*Because I want to understand myself better, I want to study the society more, to understand what happens better, the social problems (Agent D).*

*For me to have a better future (Agent E).*

The reasons which take them to choose the course or profession, for four of the agents, are due to the strict personal questions about identification and “taste”. As in the research conducted by Presta and Almeida (2008), we have concluded that the teenagers tend to generically talk about their choices due to the uncertainties of the selective process. Only one of the interviewed people related the choice to the perspective of a social position

improvement. For the agents and their families, “passing the entrance exams” and, consequently, being admitted to a public university are far from their realities. This is evident in the answers that define what would mean for the teenagers and their families to pass in the entrance exams:

*Without words, it is everything I want. I think that it is a dream of my parents. They raised us, me and my brother, for one day we be somebody in life, so a lot of things (Agent A).*

*Oh, everything, isn't it? A long path walked until now. Everything, too (Agent B).*

*It will mean a victory, first. I think that the entrance exams are a competition, so who is better wins, so it is a victory. I think it is a pride. I think all mothers and fathers who see the child being admitted to a public university is a pride for them (Agent C).*

*A very big victory. Too (Agent D).*

*Well, a new routine and it's going to be good. Well, they will like it (Agent E).*

When they were asked about personal and professional expectations as a future higher education graduated, the teenagers answered:

*I hope to succeed and be good. Succeed financially and also in the profession, as a professional (Agent A).*

*Being happy professionally and having a better structured level than I have today (Agent B).*

*I think that, personally, it is knowledge beyond what we see. A more specific thing about a subject, education. I think professionally I believe that a diploma today generates many jobs, a job door for a person (Agent C).*

*I want to work in the area of my course, it is the biggest dream and money will not be the most important. The most important will be me being happy with what I'm doing (Agent D).*

*Having a good job and a better life (Agent E).*

The interviewed students believe that conquer of higher education diploma will certainly guarantee personal and professional fulfillment. According to Bourdieu and Champagne (1997, p. 482), this illusion is due to the educational system itself and to the process called education “democratization”. For these authors, “the new benefited started to realize that it was not enough to have access to high school in order to succeed in it, and that it was not enough to succeed in it to have access to social positions” (BOURDIEU; CHAMPAGNE, 1997, p. 482). Thus, these teenagers adjust their dispositions to face the objective chances seen and sensed during the school trajectory, aiming, therefore, to increase success chances (PRESTA; ALMEIDA, 2008).

## **The family**

Family presents itself as a matrix to the *habitus* formation of the agent as a subject, who over time will suffer other influences, being far from the family’s reach as a *body* (BOURDIEU, 2001). We can, thus, separate the two main family goals in the process of reproduction and reconversion. Goals that can be apparently contradictory because they are together, but that are founded exact in the fact that the family is an objective, and at the same time subjective, social category. Firstly, the family searches for its reproduction as a *social body* (subjective social category), which implies in the transmission of certain symbolic capitals through the *habitus* (we can think from the corporal dispositions until the social and cultural capital inheritance). This goal goes against another goal related to the family not wanting to reproduce as a *field member* (objective social category), which occurs during the use of reconversion strategies in the search for the children’s social ascension and, consequently, economical capital rise. We have found, then, conducts that reinforce these contradictions in

Agent B (will try a vacancy in an Engineering course) and Agent E (will try a vacancy in Geology or Physical Education) comments:

*That I work in offices in general (Agent B).*

*A good job that is near the city (Agent E).*

Among the students' families, two did not give opinions about their children's choice face the entrance exams options, which could characterize only a lack of knowledge by these parents related to the educational system and the most rentable professions, which could characterize a certain parents' "liberalism" relating to their children professional choices (NOGUEIRA; NOGUEIRA, 2002). Agent A (will try a vacancy in a Physiotherapy course) and Agent C (will try a vacancy in Chemistry or Mathematics) say:

*I even asked my father what he would like me to do, to see if he agreed with me, but he says that what I do, what I try, if I like it, it's ok (Agent A).*

*I think they have always had a position, well, about a profession for me. I think they have always let me choose and what I choose will be what they want (Agent C).*

On the other hand, the will of another female student's family (Agent D, who will try a vacancy in Social Science) was directed to the development of the Computing area and its connection with the labor market, aiming only the employment and the wanted social ascension, shocking with the agent's goal to try a vacancy in a different area course and uncertain employment:

*My family wants me to take a course in a Computing Faculty (Agent D).*

As we can notice, the boys have initiated their professional trajectory before majority and the girls were prolonging their entrance in the labor

market, but the admission to technical courses is frequent for both genders. Parents' "liberalism" before their children's choices can be noticed in the following points: the agents did not have specific schedules for studying (parents have never established it); only one agent referred to an appropriate local to study (the bedroom); the contradictions of the inheritance above; the confluence between unfamiliarity with the themes studied by their children (parents' low school background), the empty cultural good will and the risks of educational investment; parents' total acceptance in relation to the children's higher education and probable professions. For Nogueira and Nogueira (2002, p. 24), parents would expect children schooling aiming employment, which would already mean a more durable educational journey, although they tend to opt for shorter careers and of fast professional initiation.

As in Zago (1998), we have that familiar mobilization has a great importance in studies continuation, which is no guarantee of school surviving. Families, even investing little resources and fearing children's failure, tend to elect school as social ills' redeeming. Even not expecting their children's admission to higher education, families glimpse their children's education in any higher education level reached by them as a possibility of improving their material conditions of existence. According to Zago (1998, p. 70): "children's future ambitions are limited, but they always represent the outgrowing of the social conditions [...]".

Among the interviewed people, only one said that, before the educational system, poor and privileged classes do not have the same chances. For the other agents, it is only a question of personal effort and capacity, that is, the belief in gift, talent and individual school merit is still very present. We can notice what has been defined as consensus paradigm, in which education would be a social integration factor and the selections would be dictated by talent and gift, because there would be opportunity equality (MUZZETI, 1999). For Nogueira and Nogueira (2002, p. 16), this optimistic mentality would not be present only in Social Sciences<sup>2</sup>, but also in common sense. As some interviewed agents

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<sup>2</sup> Until early 1960's, consensus paradigm dominated the sociological explanations of education,



believe, there is a common belief that the individuals compete inside an educational system with equal conditions, being that the ones who stand out through own effort or individual gifts would be rewarded with better positions in the social hierarchy (NOGUEIRA; NOGUEIRA, 2002). That is, “school would be, in this perspective, a neutral institution, that would spread a rational and objective knowledge and that would select their students based on rational criteria” (NOGUEIRA; NOGUEIRA, 2002, p. 16).

Questioned about the differences in opportunity and access existent between the poor and privileged classes, the students answered:

*No [there is no difference], it depends on each one's effort (Agent A).*

*Yes, usually the ones from the privileged class have more time to study (Agent B).*

*It depends on the person's will, commitment and also reasoning. Sometimes the person doesn't have that time, but he/she is good, a little better than the others, is differentiated (Agent C).*

*No, of course not (Agent D).*

*Yes, I think so (Agent E).*

The contradiction between belief in school neutrality and the disputes inside the educational *field* materialize in the symbolic violence exercised by school through its values imposition, that are promptly accepted by the underprivileged classes. The personal effort to which the agents referred to before the school system reproduces both forms of relationship with the culture: the student, devalued, characterized by the effort he/she makes, and the valued, brilliant and intelligent one, characterized by the student who “attends to school demands without demonstrating traces of a tough or tense effort (NOGUEIRA; NOGUEIRA, 2002, p. 16). Such findings are directly connected to the agents' *habitus* through inculcation, since childhood,

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having as a reference Durkheim's works, defined as functionalist (MUZZETI, 1999).

of school values; and from the common sense which started to state the same values. From this it resulted the parents' scholar acculturation and, consequently, in the belief that a redeeming schooling of society's ills, i.e., low capital possession, mainly economical.

### Final considerations

This study intended to verify the strategies used by a group of students from a public preparatory course who come from a small town in the interior of Sao Paulo State who aimed to be admitted to a public university. For that, we analyzed their trajectories and we attempted to aim this group's *habitus*.

It was possible to observe that the contradictions from the inheritance frequently occur in this group, which reverts in indecisions and, allied to the parents' empty cultural good will, strongly influence their children's choices due to the fact that they do not know the educational system and the labor market. This defines the choice of the major by "taste", belief in gift or influence by an agent who is distant from the familiar environment (a friend of a friend, a teacher etc.) and also the necessity of a technical course as a support for other strategies — the search for higher education.

We have noticed that the scholar institution and the sporadic contacts with university students made the teenagers want to be admitted to public higher education. The family, if it cannot help in the rupture process, do not impose objective barriers either. Finally, we have verified that the behaviors, values, forms of making decisions, familiar trajectories — parents and grandparents — and school trajectories make us discern indistinctly the existence of a *habitus* in this group, a *habitus* of this class. These teenagers have in their trajectories only school as model and referential related to legitimated culture. We can notice that in their *habitus* the same familiar history of low school background and income and the redeeming role that schooling has received in their trajectories.

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