

THE EXPECTATIONS OF ELITE FAMILIES ABOUT THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL

EXPECTATIVAS DE FAMÍLIAS DA ELITE SOBRE O PAPEL DA ESCOLA

EXPECTATIVAS DE LAS FAMILIAS DE ÉLITE SOBRE EL PAPEL DE LA ESCUELA



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ABSTRACT: The article aims to present the results of a survey on the factors involved in choosing an educational institution and the expectations regarding the role of the school on the part of representatives of families from São Paulo's economic elite who enroll their children in private schools. Individual interviews were carried out with four coordinators and a mother of students from the school investigated, in addition to the application of a questionnaire to family members interested in this school. It was identified that the expectations of families studied express the search to ensure cultural and educational capital for their children, as well as a promising future that provides them with material and symbolic benefits.

KEYWORDS: Family and education. School choice. Private school. School-family integration. Elites.

RESUMO: O artigo objetiva apresentar os resultados de uma pesquisa sobre os fatores envolvidos na escolha de uma instituição de ensino e as expectativas acerca do papel da escola por parte de representantes de famílias da elite econômica paulistana que matriculam seus filhos em escolas privadas. Foram realizadas entrevistas individuais com quatro coordenadoras e com uma mãe de estudantes da escola investigada, além da aplicação de um questionário para familiares com interesse por esta escola. Identificou-se que as expectativas de famílias estudadas expressam a busca por assegurar a seus filhos o capital cultural e escolar, bem como um futuro promissor que lhes proporcione benefícios materiais e simbólicos.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Família e educação. Escolha da escola. Escola privada. Integração escola-família. Elites.

RESUMEN: El artículo tiene como objetivo presentar los resultados de una encuesta sobre los factores involucrados en la elección de una institución educativa y las expectativas sobre el papel de la escuela por parte de representantes de familias de la élite económica paulista que matriculan a sus hijos en escuelas privadas. Se realizaron entrevistas individuales a cuatro coordinadores y a una madre de alumnos del colegio investigado, además de la aplicación de un cuestionario a familiares interesados en este colegio. Se identificó que las expectativas de las familias estudiadas expresan la búsqueda de asegurar un capital cultural y educativo a sus hijos, así como un futuro promisorio que les proporcione beneficios materiales y simbólicos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Familia y educación. Elección de escuela. Escuela privada. Integración escuela-familia. Élite.

INTRODUCTION

Over time, children's schooling has taken on an increasingly prominent role in families' lives. The importance of schooling as a means of professional and social integration is emphasized by families in general, including those from more privileged socioeconomic backgrounds, who, in principle, have other resources, such as social and economic capital, at their disposal to maintain or advance their social status (Nogueira, 2003). Given this, and based on the understanding of school and family as spaces of socialization marked by tensions and contradictions, it is important to analyze how these two institutions relate to one another and to examine the reasons that lead elite families to choose certain schools over others.

A review of the literature on the subject confirms that families' choice of school for their children is, time and again, more closely associated with maintaining social status than with a selection based on the pedagogical principles of a particular institution. In the context of private education, families have a capacity for choice linked to a liberal ideology in education: the functioning of the educational system is incorporated into market rules. In this scenario, education is viewed, in a sense, as a product that is sold to families (Marchesi & Martín, 2003).

Given this context of choice and the market, the school-family relationship lies at the heart of the competition among private educational institutions. In this sense, a large proportion of families who choose private education exhibit the behavior of "specialized consumers" (Ballion, 1982). Because they see themselves as 'clients' of the school, it is common for some parents to have expectations regarding the school's role, such as

the desire for the school to "educate" their child in areas where the family does not feel capable of doing so—for example, setting boundaries—and to prepare the child for college admission and for professional and financial success. (Balthazar et al., 2006, p. 46)

Research into families' expectations regarding the role of the school can help us understand how this connection between the two institutions works, without losing sight of the fact that the school is influenced by families' expectations and, therefore, as a 'business providing a service to a client,' the school ultimately finds itself held hostage by a bond of dependence on the family. Bourdieu (1998) suggests that there is a dimension of family management at work in the school context, since some institutional changes result from pressures exerted by families (Singly, 2007).

It should be emphasized that, until the mid-1960s, the family and the school had clearly defined roles, and the prevailing belief was that shaping the future would occur once the youngest children embarked on a long educational journey, with the aim of preparing them for entry into adulthood; families expected their children to become what their parents had not been able to become; in other words, they placed their hopes in the future and in the progress inherent in the educational process (Sayão & Aquino, 2006). In contemporary times, the roles to be played by these different institutions do not seem to be as clearly defined, and the reliance on school for the future is no longer as objectively observable. These factors significantly affect not only how schools are viewed today but also how parents relate to them. This is one of the reasons that justify the need and importance of analyzing the relationship between schools and families today and, more specifically, the expectations that families place on schools.

Furthermore, it is important to emphasize that the family still plays a role in contributing to the biological and social reproduction of society, seeking to maintain or improve the family's position in the social sphere; however, the paths to achieving these goals have changed. According to Bourdieu (1989), in light of the transformations in the organization of societies over time, the dominant form of capital has shifted from land or financial capital to educational capital. In this scenario, families are changing the game in order to preserve for their children the chances of occupying, at the very least, positions similar to those of their parents.

Thus, according to Bourdieu (1989), whereas in the past, within the mode of family reproduction, lineage designated the heirs, the mode of educational reproduction deprives the family of this power. It is the school that awards certificates and diplomas according to its own criteria; the family can only influence this process indirectly. In this context of the growing value placed on educational capital, it is not surprising that the family's relationship with the educational institution becomes more strained, since expectations for the future success of their sons and daughters rest on the school.

Although our society is dominated by educational capital, which plays a decisive role in determining the value of individuals, we must not lose sight of the influence of other factors, such as economic factors, which have a major impact on the choice of educational opportunities in the contemporary world. While schools have the mission of fostering socialization among their participants, Meksenas (1994) adds that, in a capitalist context, schools also serve to segregate people, as their goal is social reproduction, which results in the division of education along social class lines.

The family and the school are social spaces that can be considered both as producers of cultural goods and as markets for the circulation of these goods (Bourdieu, 1998). However, it is necessary to take into account the conditions under which such goods are acquired in the school and in the family. The family plays a role in early learning, which is more informal and invisible; school, on the other hand, extends and complements this learning in a more methodical and accelerated manner:

These two forms of learning are therefore responsible for shaping individuals' cultural habitus. Specifically, they constitute what is known as embodied cultural capital—that is, capital that is linked to the body and involves the incorporation of information requiring internalization, a process of assimilation that demands an investment of the social agent's own personal time. (Setton, 2004, pp. 42–43)

According to Bourdieu (1979, 1989), the pedagogical relationship is, above all, a communicative relationship. Thus, the set of cultural rules proposed by the school depends on the mastery of the tools of communication. If there is a mismatch or disconnect between the cultural competence required by the school and that acquired in the family, what occurs is that “the school system tends to reinforce the distinctions in cultural capital among its students” (Setton, 2004, p. 44). That said, it is common for schools to limit access and participation to the segment for which they are intended, which transforms social hierarchies into school hierarchies and causes the educational system to perpetuate the structure of cultural capital distribution, “reproducing and legitimizing the differences/inequalities among social groups” (Setton, 2004, p. 44).

In the Brazilian educational landscape, segregation begins at the start of a student's school life; thus, school systems function as mechanisms for reproducing the power structures present in society. Families with greater financial resources not only have a wider range of choices regarding educational options but also the opportunity to distinguish themselves from other social groups.

It should be emphasized that, according to Lahire (1997), school is not merely a reproduction of society: what happens is something much more complex. It is not enough for a child to be surrounded by objects or in environments that are stimulating from an educational standpoint. This point was corroborated by Rego (2003), who stated that an individual's appropriation of cultural heritage depends on the social, political, and economic order, as well as on the quality of the education provided.

To deepen this discussion, Rego (2003), drawing on the principles of Historical-Cultural Psychology, emphasizes that an individual's behavior and cognitive abilities depend on their experiences and educational trajectory, which are intrinsically linked to the characteristics of the social group and the historical context in which that individual is embedded. From this perspective, human development is understood as a historical and social process, shaped by the interactions the individual engages in throughout their life. Thus, the uniqueness of each individual does not stem from exclusively biological attributes or innate characteristics, but rather from the interplay of different social and cultural experiences, which are continually reinterpreted throughout their developmental journey.

From this Vygotskian perspective, such influences are not deterministic in nature, since individuals actively participate in the construction of their learning and development processes through social relationships and cultural mediations. Thus, learning opportunities and experiences in different socialization settings can expand or restrict certain developmental possibilities, without, however, defining them.

In line with this understanding, Lahire (1997) argues that the analysis of behaviors and academic outcomes requires the reconstruction of the network of interdependencies surrounding each individual. For the author, the dispositions mobilized in the school context are shaped by the diversity of experiences encountered in different socialization settings, such as the family, school, peer groups, and other social spaces. In this vein, Setton (2011) emphasizes that individuals live, simultaneously and successively, in distinct and not always equivalent social contexts, incorporating references, values, and practices that may converge or come into tension with one another. This multiplicity of experiences demonstrates that academic performance cannot be explained by a single factor but must be understood as the result of the dynamic interaction between different socialization processes and the objective and symbolic conditions that shape individuals' life trajectories.

In light of the considerations presented thus far, when reflecting on the changes that have taken place in contemporary families, the current market-oriented view of education, and the relationship that families from the economic elite establish with schools, it is important to focus on the following questions: How do elite families seek information about the institution where they intend to enroll their sons and daughters? What expectations do families from São Paulo's economic elite have of the school?

These are the guiding questions of this article, which aims to investigate the factors involved in choosing an educational institution and the expectations regarding the school's role

held by representatives of families from São Paulo's economic elite who enroll their children in private schools. This topic will be analyzed based on the contributions of authors in the Sociology of Education—with particular emphasis on Bourdieu's theories—which provide theoretical frameworks for discussing the relationship between the school and the family.

METHOD

To conduct this study, methodological procedures were adopted based on the works of Saraiva and Wagner (2013), Fevorini (2009), Almeida and Nogueira (2003), among others, which guided the definition of the research approach, data collection instruments, and analysis strategies. The research procedures developed included:

- a) A literature review of recent academic research on the family-school relationship and on the schooling of elite groups, conducted between 1999 and 2019, using the following databases: Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO), the USP Bibliographic Database (Dedalus), the Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations at the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG)—as it is a leading university in research on the schooling of elites—and the Anísio Teixeira National Institute for Educational Studies and Research (INEP). The keywords used in this search were: family-school relationship, education of the elites, parental involvement, school market, and educational strategies.
- b) Conducting semi-structured individual interviews with four coordinators (one from each segment: Early Childhood Education, Early Elementary, Late Elementary, and High School) at a large private school located in the southern part of the city of São Paulo, which serves the city's economic elite, conducted via the Zoom Meetings platform (due to social distancing measures in the context of the covid-19 pandemic), for a total of four interviews.
- c) Analysis of responses to an online questionnaire (via Google Forms) administered by the school and completed by family members who expressed interest in enrollment at this private school, from early childhood education through high school, collected from 2013 to 2019, totaling 32,545 completed questionnaires over that period.

- d) Conducting a semi-structured individual interview via Zoom Meetings with a mother who had just enrolled her two daughters at that institution, following a lengthy school selection process.
- e) Observation of three meetings at which this private school presented its educational program to families interested in enrolling their children.

Finally, data analysis was conducted based on the thematic content analysis proposed by Bardin (2011), through which central themes (thematic axes) were identified by reviewing the research material and examined in light of propositions by authors in the Sociology of Education regarding the relationship between elite schools and families.

It should also be noted that, as this is a study involving human participants, the research adhered to the ethical principles established for studies of this nature, in accordance with the guidelines of CNS Resolution No. 510/2016 of the National Health Council.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

With the aim of investigating the choice of an educational institution and the expectations regarding the role of the school held by families from São Paulo's elite, the analysis of the data collected involved a discussion of two central thematic areas: a) the family-school relationship and the expectations of elite families regarding the school; b) the choice of school by elite families, as presented below.

Family-school relationship and elite families' expectations regarding the school

According to Bourdieu (2004), a family's investment in school always represents an action that leads us to consider the importance and significance of the relationships between cultural and economic capital in the strategies implemented during the schooling process. Bourdieu (2004) states that "families are driven by a tendency to perpetuate their social being" (p. 3), which forms the basis for educational strategies. In this sense, the educational strategies identified in families are the result of an individual or group *habitus* and are linked in various ways to families' social, economic, cultural, educational, and symbolic capital.

One of the aspects emphasized by authors in the Sociology of Education (including Almeida & Nogueira, 2003; Grün, 2003; Nogueira, 1998, 2003; Prado, 2008)—based on Bourdieu's propositions, which examine the microsocial level of relations between family and

school without, however, disregarding the influence of macrostructural determinants—is the idea that neither the family nor the school constitutes a homogeneous reality: they are diverse both among themselves and internally.

In other words, families are entities within which private life takes place, and their members are individuals who possess unique attributes, including sociability governed by informal norms. Although the home is a place of privacy, families are not immune to macrostructural influences, originating from the economic sphere and the state, that maintain specific ties with them, though these influences do not mechanically and directly determine domestic arrangements. Furthermore, one must consider the expansion of family arrangements, that is, the recognition and consolidation of different family configurations that go beyond the traditional nuclear model. This diversity reflects the changes that have taken place in society and highlights the broadening of the concept of family, taking into account distinct forms of family formation based on emotional, social, and legal bonds, which makes it clear that, empirically speaking, there is not ‘the family,’ but rather families organized in distinct ways. Therefore, an understanding of the multiple family compositions and their ways of life becomes crucial for analyzing the relationships between them and the school. Just as we cannot adopt a homogeneous view of family configurations, we must not lose sight of the fact that each school has its own specific characteristics, even though all of them, in the case of the institutions we intend to discuss, belong to the same category: that of private schools serving the elites.

Among the changes in the relationship between schools and families in contemporary times, the following stand out: the growing closeness between the two spheres, with an increase in formal and informal contacts and modes of communication between them; the individualization of the relationship, with an increase in face-to-face interactions; and the redefinition of roles or the division of educational labor between the two parties, with schools extending their involvement to the physical, emotional, and moral aspects of student development, and families asserting their right to have a say in the school’s pedagogical and disciplinary matters (Nogueira, 2003; Resende et al., 2018). However, these processes do not occur without difficulties, tensions, and contradictions, even though the idea of partnership is the central theme of the discourses adopted by schools.

In the present day, according to Fialho (2012), the education market is more competitive, and entering the workforce has become more difficult. This author asserts that, according to Bourdieu (2004), the process of democratization of education, which began in the 1950s, ensured the entry of the ‘disadvantaged’ into educational institutions and, at the same

time, led to an intense process of economic and symbolic devaluation of degrees. As a result, middle-class families (and upper-class families, in our view) feel compelled to devise “increasingly sophisticated and diversified educational strategies in the ongoing pursuit of social mobility, within a more competitive and demanding market where degrees have gradually lost their value” (Fialho, 2012, p. 32).

In this regard, it is worth highlighting the cultural goodwill of these families, which, according to Bourdieu (2004), is revealed in their continuous effort to ensure the acquisition of legitimate culture and in their strong commitment to school culture (Fialho, 2012). In his research findings, Fialho (2012) concludes that the watchword is “to invest always and more in the school experience and, presumably, in a successful future for their children” (p. 34). Thus, both the family and the school are committed to intense and continuous investment. From this perspective, family investment in their children’s academic careers is directly related to the establishment of a network of socially profitable relationships; Bourdieu (2004) refers to this type of strategy as “the product of the work of establishment and maintenance necessary to produce and reproduce durable and useful relationships, capable of providing material and symbolic gains” (p. 68).

Consequently, driven by a desire for their children’s academic success and in an effort to ensure a promising future for them, families turn to a wide variety of expert advice and seek to define—in an efficient manner—“a repertoire of daily activities and practices that they believe will ensure the development of individual talents and the skills demanded by contemporary society” (Fialho, 2012, p. 3). Their children’s academic success and promising professional future ultimately become a central aspect of family life; this perspective justifies the significant investments, high expectations, and even the anxiety that manifests itself in these families’ behaviors.

In this context, the phenomenon of ‘clientelism,’ as described by Saraiva and Wagner (2013), becomes evident; this consists of the process through which the school emerges as the place where everything must function in order to meet the demands and expectations of families.

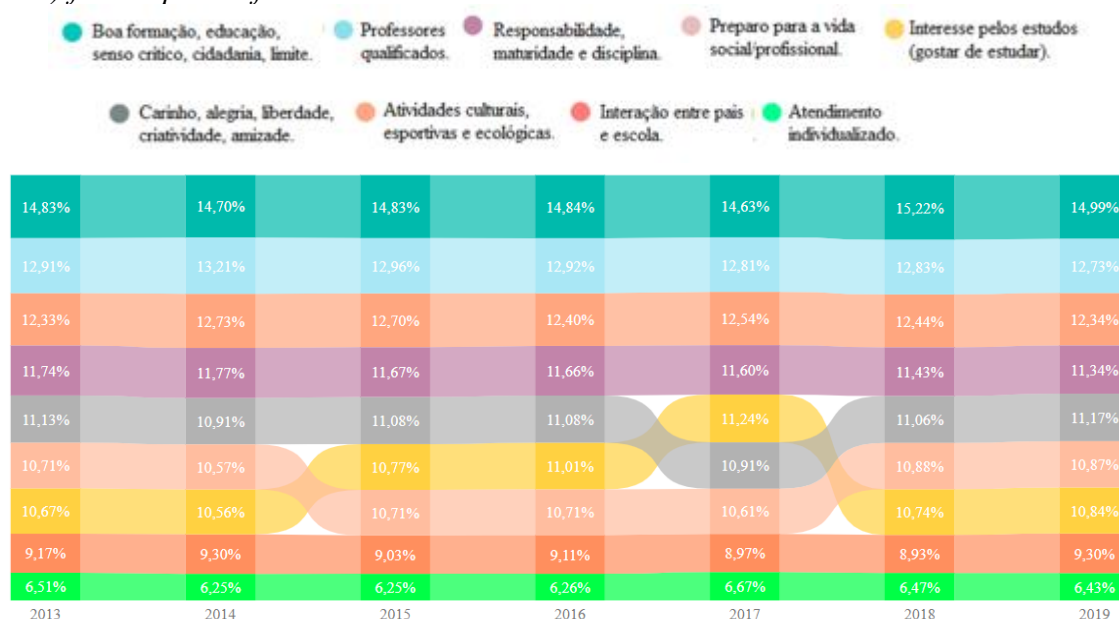
Among the expectations and demands of elite families regarding the school institution are the desire to be welcomed by schools and for schools to be capable of establishing a close relationship and assertive dialogue with families, as well as to take a more individualized approach toward each student in order to identify their strengths and limitations (Favorini, 2009; Nogueira, 1998). In this regard, Favorini (2009) emphasizes that “the school’s ability to listen

to parents has proven to be of paramount importance for maintaining a relationship of trust between them and the school” (p. 92). Families expect a relationship based on reciprocity, not submission; indeed, the fact that their criticisms and suggestions are not taken into account leads to dissatisfaction and insecurity (Favorini, 2009).

In addition to the considerations mentioned so far, the following section presents the data obtained through the analysis of the responses to the questionnaire administered to families by the school (when parents approached the school with the intention of enrolling their children there). As will be seen, the data not only corroborate previous studies but also shed light on important points that contribute to understanding aspects related to the expectations of elite families regarding the school (Figure 1):

Figure 1.

Expectations regarding school – Overview (from Early Childhood Education through High School) for the period from 2013 to 2019



Note. Research data.

With regard to parents' expectations regarding the school under study, a common theme across all levels (from Early Childhood Education to High School) was the high frequency with which parents selected the item “*Good education, critical thinking, citizenship, and boundaries,*” followed by “*Qualified teachers*” and “*Preparation for social and professional life.*”

These responses highlight the fact that these families have expectations regarding the school that are linked to the purpose of education—“*Good education, critical thinking,*

citizenship, and boundaries”—and, to that end, they seek to rely on “qualified teachers,” which rank second among their choices. Regardless of their children’s ages, families have very similar expectations, including regarding “*preparation for social/professional life*” from a very young age, and they fail to prioritize certain aspects important for personal development, such as “*affection, joy, freedom, creativity, and friendship*”; although the families surveyed desire these qualities for their children, the fact that they choose not to prioritize this option in favor of others raises questions about their aspirations regarding their children’s education.

It should be noted that, as Aguiar (2009) has already pointed out, elite families view their investments in their children’s education as a means of acquiring the capital and skills they deem essential to their offspring’s future success.

School choice among elite families

Parents’ attitudes toward choosing private schools have changed significantly in recent decades. In the past, there was greater homogeneity among schools, and consequently, less need to make choices (Nogueira, 1998). However, this reality has changed, especially in the realm of private schools, and families now find themselves responsible for defining their family’s educational vision and selecting the desired school, in order to choose “among the different profiles of educational institutions, which vary according to multiple aspects: location, infrastructure, student body, degree of tradition, quality of education, disciplinary climate, and educational approach, to name the most important ones” (Nogueira, 1998, p. 162).

Today, therefore, choice has become a necessity. From ‘captive users,’ who were not required to make any choices, families have become ‘school consumers’ (Ballion, 1982). According to Ballion (1982), among the factors that explain this new behavior among families and the school system are: the increasing complexity of the school system, which now requires users to possess specific skills to navigate it; the diversity of pedagogical models and styles adopted by educational institutions, which compels parents to choose the style best suited to their educational goals; and the diversity of educational services offered by private schools as a result of the variety of family needs.

With an expanded range of options for those with high incomes, what happens is the selection of a school—often viewed as a service provider—that must meet the demands of its clientele (Aquino et al., 2015). Schools have also increasingly become a basis for evaluating the parents themselves: their economic and cultural resources, their educational models, and so

on (Saraceno & Naldini, 2003). In short, parents evaluate one another based on their choice of educational institution and the investment they are willing to make.

It should be emphasized that Gewirtz et al. (1995) conducted a study in which they identified several groups of parents based on the type of choice they used when selecting schools for their sons and daughters. Among these groups, given their consistency with the findings of our study, we will highlight here those referred to as privileged/skilled choosers, often referred to in the Brazilian literature as 'parents better equipped to make good choices' or 'privileged choosers,' and the group of parents whose choice may involve a process of child-matching—that is, finding the right school to fit each child's profile.

According to Gewirtz et al. (1995), the group of parents identified as privileged/skilled choosers consists of middle-class professionals (primarily civil servants and those in scientific occupations), whose prominent characteristics include a propensity to make choices and a high regard for the act of choosing. The decision regarding which school to attend occupies a central place in family life, and these parents distinguish between different types of schools (they decode the school system). The family's network of relationships (social capital, in Bourdieu's terms) plays an important role. All of this leads to great complexity in their decision-making process, manifested by ambivalence or, at times, even mistakes, since the greater the range of choices, the higher the parents' expectations and the greater the difficulty in choosing among the different schools, as, in general, none of them seems perfect to them (Nogueira, 1998).

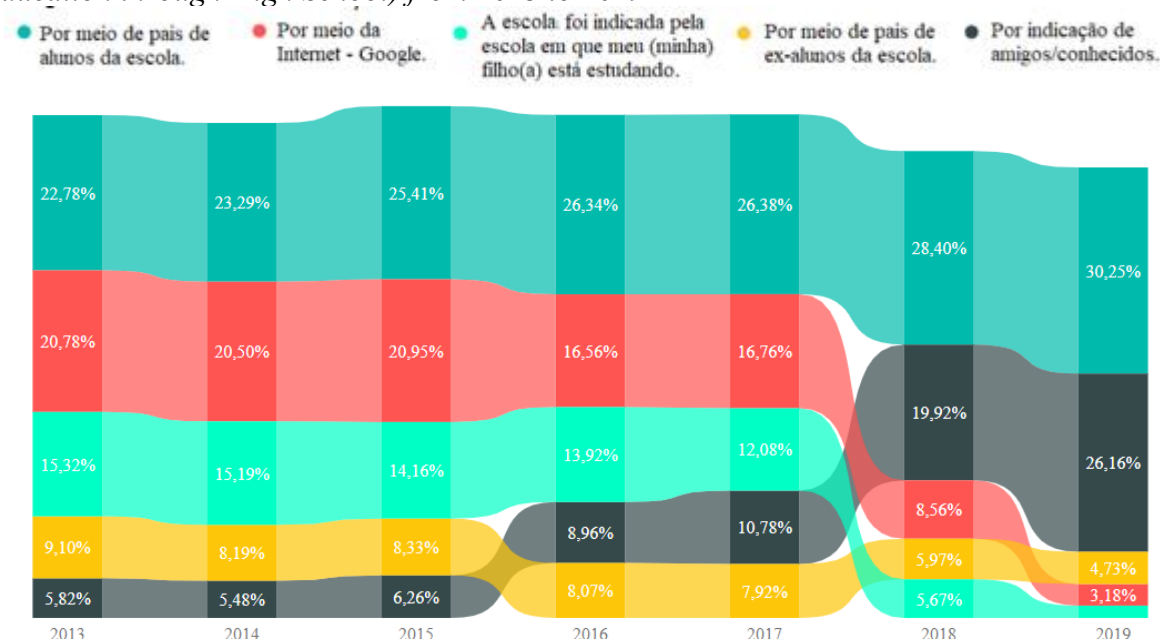
Also according to the classification by Gewirtz et al. (1995), there is a second group of parents whose choice may involve a process of child-matching, in which they seek a match between the characteristics of the school and those of their child—essentially, ensuring that the institution is a good fit for the student. The final decision is generally based on the parents' personal impressions and feelings, stemming from their visits to the schools under consideration or from 'open house' events. Within this group of parents, the researchers proposed a subdivision based on emphasis: objective/goal-oriented and subjective/person-oriented. In the first subgroup, the main criterion for choice appears to be each institution's academic outcomes (pass rates on exams and competitive exams, placement in published rankings, performance in various subjects, etc.), and the underlying logic is focused on achieving success. For parents in the subjective/person-oriented subgroup, however, the aspects considered most important are the school's atmosphere and its ability to develop the student's full potential. In this sense, the rationale is rooted in a concern for the holistic development of the child's personality. However, it is important to note that, for both groups, the social composition of a school's student body

is a determining factor in their choice. What matters to parents is who their child's classmates will be—both to reduce the risk of 'bad influences' and to ensure the benefits that come from interacting with high-achieving peers for the learning process (Nogueira, 1998).

The data obtained through the analysis of the questionnaire administered to families regarding their school choices are presented in Figure 2, which shows their responses on how they learned about and selected the school:

Figure 2.

How families learned about and selected the school – Overview (from Early Childhood Education through High School) from 2013 to 2019



Note. Research data.

Figure 2 shows the five most common responses (i.e., those that appeared most frequently) from families interested in enrolling their children in the private school in São Paulo under study, covering all educational levels (from Early Childhood Education through High School): “through parents of students at the school,” “through recommendations from friends or acquaintances,” “through the Internet or Google,” “through parents of former students at the school,” and “the school was recommended by the school where my child is currently enrolled.”

Figure 2 confirms that families exhibited two trends over the years analyzed (from 2013 to 2019): a decline in the search for information via the Internet/Google and an increase in referrals from parents of students at the school or from friends/acquaintances. It should be noted that the school under study, which began operations in the mid-1970s, had its first students

referred by family members and friends; and today, nearly fifty years later, this trend continues. We will draw on the study conducted by Gewirtz et al. (1995) to understand this phenomenon. As discussed earlier, the authors termed the group of parents who value the ability to choose and rely primarily on information from their families' social networks privileged/skilled choosers. For them, the greater the ability to choose, the higher not only are parents' expectations (as this study has confirmed), but also the difficulty of choosing among different schools, because, in general, none of them seem perfect to them (Nogueira, 1998).

The survey data also corroborate the findings of van Zanten (1988). The French researcher noted that the families who participated in her study are generally skeptical of statistical information and do not seek answers from education professionals, as they believe that these professionals do not give due importance to relevant problems and emphasize positive aspects in order to facilitate the growth of educational institutions. As in our study, French parents turned to their social networks, consulting—in most cases—other parents whose children attend the schools about which they sought information.

Another study that also presented similar results was the survey by Brandão et al. (2012) involving students, parents, and teachers in public and private schools in Rio de Janeiro. The authors found that both families in the private school system (43%) and those in the public school system (58%) turned to their social networks, composed of relatives and friends, for information about educational institutions (Brandão et al., 2012). This finding reinforces the idea of the importance of social relationships in the search for information.

By comparing the data from the two figures presented, it can be inferred that families interested in enrolling their children in the school already have some impressions of what to expect from it, since a significant portion of these families, across all segments, seek information from parents of current students. That is, even before the school's educational program is presented to them, these families already learn about the nuances of the institution through other parents and form expectations regarding it.

However, based on the statements of the four educational coordinators interviewed, it became clear that, in day-to-day school life, the expectations expressed in the figures do not play such a central role in the relationship between families and the school because everyday issues take up a large part of the time in this interaction between parents and the institution: conversations about students' emotional well-being, academic performance, criticism of teachers' performance, complaints about test grading and completion of classroom assignments, injuries—in short, a multitude of occurrences in daily school life. In other words,

parents approach the school with very clear and ambitious expectations; however, according to the coordinators' assessment, day-to-day demands cause families' focus to shift toward a greater concern for their children's immediate well-being—which is, in a way, quite understandable.

Finally, brief considerations regarding school choice among elite families will be presented below, based on an interview conducted with a mother who had recently enrolled her daughters in the institution under study.

The first point to emphasize is that, in making her decision regarding the school, the interviewee visited nine different institutions and, in the process, researched only schools that had been in operation for many years—a choice that may be related to the idea that schools with a longer history offer greater 'security' in the selection process, given their established tradition. Unlike most of the respondent families in the questionnaire mentioned earlier, she typically seeks information from people who work at the schools.

One of the reasons that motivated the interviewee to enroll her daughters in the school was the idea that this school "*values discipline*" and her belief that students need to "*get used to the pace of life out there*." This appreciation for schools with a more "*disciplinarian*" approach came up repeatedly throughout the interview. Her account of her first visit to the school underscores how much she values discipline: she liked the fact that it was a "*quiet school*," even "*somewhat military-style*," with a level of discipline she hadn't seen at any other school and with students "*who communicated through gestures*." The school coordinator showed her one of the students' notebooks, and the mother was delighted by how well-organized the materials were.

Another factor that influenced her choice was the school's size. She says she did not choose one of the other schools because it was a very large institution with many students and because her oldest daughter is "*very shy*." This perspective points to what Gewirtz et al. (1995) termed the child-matching process, that is, the process of seeking a match between the school's characteristics and those of the child, as a means of adapting the institution to the student, as discussed earlier.

One fact frequently mentioned by the interviewee was the practice of waiting in line to enroll at these institutions, noting that at one of them there were more than ninety students ahead of her daughters. It is not possible to state categorically that schools use this strategy so that parents who secure spots feel they were "*lucky*" and "*couldn't let the opportunity pass them by*"; however, this may be a plausible argument, given that the private school market in the city

of São Paulo includes a significant number of institutions. In any case, “*waiting lists*” serve as effective marketing, since they lend the institution a certain credibility, and many schools capitalize on this waiting period, relying on the logic that “*if everyone wants it, it must be good.*” Toward the end of the interview, the mother points out her difficulty in selecting a school due to the sheer number and variety of options the city offers.

As mentioned earlier, this difficulty in making a choice has already been addressed by Ballion (1982), who identified three factors underlying this difficulty: the complexity of the school system, which requires greater competence from its users; the lack of consensus around a single model of education; and the diversification of educational services offered by the private school system, in response to the increasingly diverse demands of families. In the interview with this mother, it is possible to see how her priorities shift throughout her search. In other words, in São Paulo, there is such a wide variety of schools that families find it difficult to define their main priorities.

According to Gewirtz et al. (1995), there is a culture of choice among parents, a culture that can be attributed to neoliberal educational policy and its advocacy of the school market. For Ballion (1982, 1986, 1991), however, there is a rational consumer attitude toward schools, coupled with families’ increasingly diverse demands in the face of a growing and varied supply. According to Gewirtz et al. (1995), class-based strategies seek to perpetuate educational and social distinctions. Ballion (1982, 1986, 1991) argues that consumption strategies are shaped by the effort to match the products offered to the needs experienced. The researchers therefore recognize the crucial role of family cultural capital in decision-making behaviors, particularly capital consisting of information about how the education system operates.

In short, the interview revealed aspects of the points observed by the aforementioned group of authors: a mother who is a ‘school consumer’ seeking the best ‘product’ on the market. In other words, a mother who searched intensely and systematically for a school that would meet her goals and, to a lesser extent, her daughters’ profiles. The interviewee conducted a thorough investigation in search of the “*best school*,” sometimes without specifying which criteria would guide her choice and noting that selecting from among the many institutions in the city of São Paulo was an almost impossible task.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The purpose of this study was to investigate the factors involved in the choice of an educational institution and the expectations regarding the role of the school held by representatives of families from São Paulo's economic elite who enroll their children in private schools.

Although the data from this study refer to only a fragment of reality, the analysis of these results yielded several research findings, summarized below. One of these is the fact that, when searching for information amid a multitude of options, families tend to rely primarily on other families who already have children enrolled at the institution under consideration. Although Internet searches were significant among the quantitative data, this option gradually declined over the analyzed period (2013 to 2019), giving greater prominence to seeking information about the institution from families who have children enrolled there. This result corroborates the findings of other studies, including those conducted by van Zanten (2007) and Brandão et al. (2012). Beyond the influence that social relationships have on school choice, it is important to note that, in the case under investigation, one must not lose sight of the fact that this is an institution recognized for placing students in universities considered among the best and that frequently ranks at the top of school lists and rankings, which reinforces the idea of a choice shaped by academic results and the logic of instrumentalization for success, as mentioned by Gewirtz et al. (1995).

Furthermore, the choice of school in a context as specific as Brazil's reinforces the idea of social distinction, with education serving as yet another element in the network of products and services (Sayão & Aquino, 2006). It is worth noting that families with greater choice are those who, according to Bourdieu's logic, possess more economic capital. That is, the ability to choose a school is not a reality for all families with school-age children. Langouet and Leger (1991) found that this ability and the strategies employed by families vary according to social class: while those with financial resources exhibit 'strategic' behaviors—involving long-term planning and anticipation of outcomes—among the disadvantaged, what is observed are behaviors that more closely resemble immediate reactions (based on direct experience) to unforeseen situations. The Brazilian education system exhibits a class-based character that makes it easy to identify groups with economic and social advantages (Giroto & Cássio, 2018; Gomes & Melo, 2021). However, based on the data obtained, it was possible to verify the same scenario already pointed out by Nogueira (2010): families with more options are also those that

express more doubts and anxiety, a finding confirmed in the interview with the coordinators and in the testimony of the interviewed mother.

The results highlight the growing presence (often perceived as demanding) of families within schools and the impact of the information they provide to other families on the growth of private institutions. We see that some schools are already aware of this trend and take care to ensure that their actions are viewed positively by the school community. At times, we observe what is known as clientelism, as discussed by Saraiva and Wagner (2013), whereby the school becomes the place where everything must function to meet the most diverse expectations. A finding from Fialho's (2012) research can also be analyzed in this context: families who invest heavily in their children's education sometimes develop high expectations and may exhibit anxiety in their behavior. It is possible to draw a parallel between the anxiety displayed by these parents not only regarding the choice of school but also regarding the expectations placed on it and the activities carried out there.

New family demands arise all the time, and in the wake of this trend, schools adapt to the situation and take on various forms in an effort to meet these needs. From this perspective, it is clear that the logic of the school market is diverse, in part because there are more competitors, as discussed by Dubet (2007). However, it is important to note that "the school market exhibits the dual characteristic of a market in a capitalist system: it is at once open and structurally marked by countless inequalities" (Charlot, 2020, p. 63), including the fact that "competition is distorted by countless inequalities linked to social class, gender, cultural group, type of education (public or private), and even skin color" (Charlot, 2020, p. 63). According to the author, we live under the dominant logic of performance and competition; that is, individuals find themselves in a position where they must "make effective use of themselves so as not to be a loser and to be among the richest, most famous, and most powerful" (Charlot, 2020, p. 68). However, it is impossible for everyone to be part of this exclusive group, and those who are live in a situation of "permanent and widespread comparison and ranking" (Charlot, 2020, p. 68).

Another aspect worth emphasizing is the changing role of children in contemporary society. We often see parents who place their children at the center of the family, which creates high expectations regarding their performance and an excess of overprotectiveness, an attitude that often runs counter to the development of autonomy. Compounding this situation are the demands placed by families regarding their children's performance at school.

In this context, the school-family relationship can either aim to establish a partnership focused on student development or, conversely, serve merely as another means of assigning blame to both parties. It is up to both the school and the family to reevaluate this relationship in order to redefine the roles of each of these institutions.

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