

'Arguments' for School Choice: A Case Study with Portuguese Parents

«Argumentos» para la elección del centro educativo: un estudio de caso con padres portugueses

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Key words

- School Choice
- Educational Policy
- Family-School relationship
- Educational Inequality
- Social Inequality
- Public Schools

Palabras clave

- Elección de escuela
- Política educativa
- Relaciones familia-escuela
- Desigualdad educativa
- Desigualdad social
- Escuelas públicas

Abstract

Taking as an empirical basis some of the data from a questionnaire applied to a sample of approximately eight hundred parents from three public secondary schools, this paper discusses how various categories of parents organise «hierarchies of excellence» through the «arguments for choice» that they prioritise when choosing their children's school for entrance into secondary education (year 10 of schooling, equivalent to the year 4 of compulsory secondary education in Spain - ESO). The analysis of the data highlights that, in all segments of parents, a group can be found that attaches great importance to academic indicators; in addition, an unequal concentration of these groups was verified in the three establishments studied, which reflects a predominance of different types of public in each school. Thus, even though the importance attributed to the «arguments for choice» varies according to the educational level of the parents, in the cases studied the «hierarchies of excellence» are distinguished, above all, by the *school* variable.

Resumen

Tomando como base empírica algunos de los datos del cuestionario aplicado a una muestra de cerca de ochocientos padres seleccionados en tres centros públicos de enseñanza secundaria, en este artículo analizamos el modo cómo diferentes categorías de padres organizan «jerarquías de excelencia», a través de los «argumentos de elección» a los que dan prioridad cuando escogen el centro educativo, al pasar a la enseñanza secundaria en 10º curso (4º de la ESO). Del análisis de los datos destaca que, en todos los segmentos de padres, encontramos una fracción que concede gran importancia a los indicadores de naturaleza académica; verificamos, además, una concentración desigual de estas fracciones en los tres establecimientos estudiados, lo que refleja un predominio de diferentes tipos de público en cada escuela. De este modo, aunque varíe la importancia atribuida a los «argumentos de elección», según el nivel de estudios de los padres, en los casos estudiados las «jerarquías de excelencia» se distinguen, sobre todo, de acuerdo con la variable *centro*.

Citation

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LOCAL MICRO-REGULATION OF THE EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMES OFFERED IN THE CONTEXT OF THE "SCHOOLING CRISIS"¹

Within the "grid structure" that characterises the "multi-regulation" processes of the education system (Barroso, 2006), the field of study which analyses the role of parents² as individual or collective actors, with privileged involvement in the complex "micro-regulation" processes of the available education programmes, has been little investigated to date. However, the growing tendency seen in various places to increasingly base public policies on "consumer rights" at the expense of "citizens rights" (Whitty, 1996) has led to the gap left for the regulation of the "offer" by the "demand" being broadened, in the case of education, at certain times and in certain areas (Barroso, 2003:77). One of the most common ways of encouraging this alteration is to allow parents³ to choose their children's school more or less freely.

The education reforms which, over the last 25 or 30 years, have marked the education systems of key countries, especially in

the USA and Great Britain, present as a common link, albeit with substantially varying settings and degrees, namely, the consolidation of various forms of parental involvement in the *governance* structures of schools. Ultimately, this translates into a readjustment of the power relations between the *producer* and the *consumer*. This reformist wave arose in the context of a (supposed) "school crisis" that manifested itself, above all, in the last quarter of the 20th century. The discussion of the political project led by state schools has become more profound, showing up its limitations and contradictions as a "space to build citizenship". This one appears as "essentially hierarchical and authoritarian"; incapable of "recognising the reality of inequality and social heterogeneity"; and that seriously contributes to the legitimacy of social reproduction. However, it remains a context "where citizenship practices can be developed, and where civic rights are exercised", above all, "for those children and young people who suffer from - we cannot forget it - serious "citizenship deficits" (Morán 2007:16). On the one hand, schools opened to a new public, and school pathways were widened, a process referred to as "quantitative democratisation" by Prost (1986), cited by Merle (2002). And yet, certain inequalities would persist or be reinforced. This is because, as stated by Duru-Bellat (2006: 20), "more education for all does not mean the same education for all", that is to say, "quantitative democratisation" coexists with "segregating democracy" (Merle, 2002:81)⁴. Duru-Bellat (2006: 21)

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This paper provides a reformulation an analysis presented in an earlier version in *Públicos Escolares e Regulação da Educação. Lutas concorrenciais na arena educativa* (Antunes y Sá, 2010).

² In English, the terms "parents" and "guardians" will be used interchangeably to refer to their Portuguese equivalents "pais" and "encarregados de educação".

³ When we refer to choosing a school, we are limiting this to mean choosing among establishments in public education. In fact, this concept can take a much broader meaning to include other types of choice. With Van Zanten, for example, it includes four different strategies: i) the choice between public and private establishments, ii) the choice within the public sector, iii) the choice of residential area based on the school location (catchment area) and iv) the option to "have a say in local educational establishments" to the detriment of "desertion" (Van Zanten, 2009: 7-9).

⁴ P. Merle used the expression "segregating democracy" to refer, at the same time, to a widening of the social base of the recruitment to a determined level of schooling, and to the persistence of social inequalities in the access to different stages of the same level of schooling. As stated by this author, taking as an example the "baccalauréat", "the first part of the phrase refers to the social widening of access to secondary education (bac) regardless of stages (series); the second part refers to the growing divergence in social recruitment between the different stages of secondary schooling" (Merle, 2002: 81).

concludes that “a true democratisation at certain levels is not antagonistic to the growing social hierarchisation in the different pathways. The persistence of “segregating democracy”, more than overcoming inequalities, resulted in them becoming “transferred” and “reorganised”. This interpretation is supported by studies on the inequality of education opportunities, family dynamics and social mobility (see for example, Bernardi, 2007) and other works focused on socio-economic determinants of inequality (cf., amongst others, Budría, 2010). In this sense, education can be analysed as a space where social processes and *competitive struggles* (Bourdieu, 1979) are developed, which have an impact on the distribution of opportunities; and on the distribution of material and symbolic resources that are both valuable and rare. As a consequence, it affects the social allocation of sectors of the population and the democratisation of societies.

In this context, the investment of young people and their respective families in selecting the “right options” (of school, of pathway, of class) constitutes one of the possible strategies to manage “scholastic inflation” (Duru-Bellat, 2006) and the emergence of new “ways of choosing” (Canário, 2005)⁵. These new ways of selection include the introduction of policies to give parents the right of free choice of school, and the rebuilding of funding formulas, now linked to the number of students attracted by the school, in this way mimicking the merchant logic of the business environment. These new “devolution-of-powers” policies have the implicit idea that the responsibility for education is, above all, an obligation of the individuals and their families, and less and less of the State. Apparently more power is

conferred on civil society, in its *commodified* version, in which consumer rights are placed above those of citizens” (Whitty and Power, 1997: 220-221). In this context, “the management of problems and conflicts tends to be delegated to the periphery” (Canário, 2005: 86) with the consequent taking away of responsibility from the State for any eventual “school failures”. As Reay observed (1998), the market rationale places the weight of the success and failure on each student, parent or school. Parallel to this, the consolidation of the “sovereignty of the consumer” re-conceptualises the *ideal type* of the “responsible parent” (Stoer & Cortezão, 1999; Sá, 2007); besides, as shown by various authors, this tendency allows for a “re-gentrification” of the system, given that it favours those social groups that possess the cultural, social and economic capital that enables them to access the “sanctuaries of excellence” and reproduce their advantages in that way. Based on the data from research carried out by Moore and Davenport (1990), Ball (1995:223) states that “the market provides a mechanism for reinvention and legitimation of hierarchy and differentiation through the ideology of diversity, competition and choice.” And because of this, Ball concludes, “the market works as a class strategy, creating a mechanism that could be exploited by the middle classes as a reproduction strategy in the search for a relative advantageous situation.” (Ball, 1995: 224-5). Van Zanten (2009), in a recent study which contains the research she carried out in four Parisian communes in the period between 1999 and 2005, maintained that choice of school could function as a strategy of “social closure” for the benefit of the different segments of the middle class. She studied the choice of school “as new way of monopolising certain educational offerings thanks to “usurpation strategies” and “strategies of exclusion” (Van Zanten, 2009: 17). Her study concluded that the different strategies of choice did not all have

⁵ As stated by Canário (2005: 85), “a selection of the “best”, which characterised the (elitist) school of “certainties”, has become a selective process geared towards an “exclusion” of the worst, by relative exclusion.”

the same implications for social and scholastic segregation or for the monopolisation of resources: "The choices that depend on place of residence put into action primarily by 'technocrats' to move closer to the public good, are the most efficient in terms of monopolising resources, and are at the same time the least visible and permit the parents who put them into practice to be seen as 'good citizens' who send their children to the local school." (ibíd.: 242)⁶.

In another study one of the authors of this paper observed that the ideology of the educational "quasi-markets" (Le Grand, 1991) rests on the premise that the introduction of market-oriented policies in education will promote competition between schools, encouraging them to use resources more efficiently, producers becoming more accountable to consumers, increasing the opportunities for choice and promoting diversity in the educational offers available. However, for this to occur (all) the parents need to be motivated to choose, need to be able to choose, and above all, they need to know how to make informed choices, based on criteria about the academic excellence of the schools. Only then can it be expected that the "good" schools will outweigh the "bad" schools (Sá, 2004: 316-7). However, some research projects have questioned these prerequisites, showing, for example, that not all parents give equal priority to the *culture of choice* (Ball, 1995: 217-8; Walford, 1994). Further, in certain cases it has been found that, more than it being a case of parents choosing a school, it has been more a case of schools choosing the parents (Whitty et al., 1999). On the other hand, some parental sectors, when they make their choice, seem

to prioritise more school *qualities* that may or may not coincide with the criteria of academic excellence that are presumed in school choice policies (Adler et al., 1989; Walford, 1994)⁷. Likewise, according to Adler *et al.*, at the moment of choice, parents tend to make a decision based on limited, and at times inadequate, information, and restrict the range of options to a very small number. For his part, Walford, based not only on his own research, but also on various studies by other researchers (for example, Gewirtz, Ball, and Bowe, 1993, amongst others), stated that "the research shows that various parents make choices differently" (1994:123). He also maintained that these differences were related to socio-economic, ethnic and cultural status of those who *choose* (see for example, Fuenmayor *et al.*, 2003; Cebolla Boado, 2007). The differences in investment in the decision-making processes, the value given to different criteria of "excellence" and the degree of importance attached to the preferences of their children, are aspects which distinguish the "various parents". These differences have strong implications in terms of equality since, as stated by Walford (1994: 123), "those children who come from a background which does not value education highly are more likely to find themselves in the less popular schools, while those from families already valuing education are more likely to end up in the popular schools". As remarked by Olmedo Reinoso and Santa Cruz Grau (2008:5) "the opportunity to act is frequently linked to the idea of 'capacity', understood as being related to the properties and other relevant

⁶ We do not have data on the weight that this strategy has in the Portuguese context. We consider however that in Portugal there is a cheap variant of these strategic residential choices: the choice of a "guardian of convenience" (cf. Sá and Antunes, 2007).

⁷ Adler and other authors, in a study conducted in three British LEAs (Local Education Authorities) concluded that at least within the state system, the majority of parents who chose on behalf of their children seemed to adopt a more humanist perspective that a technological one, and were less preoccupied with quantifiable criteria than with creating an atmosphere that promotes the well-being of the child (Adler et al., 1989).

resources that are available to families. Capacity, strategy, and resources are found to be intimately linked". It is important, therefore, to understand whether also in Portugal, the processes of choosing a school constitute a *class strategy* by trying to identify, on the one hand, the *excellence criteria* on which choices are based, and on the other hand, if a correlation exists between these criteria and the characteristics of the population studied.

RATIONALES FOR SCHOOL CHOICE IN THE PORTUGUESE CONTEXT: THE CASE OF VILA FORMOSA.

A brief contextualisation of the study. A characterisation of the sample.

In Portugal, the regulatory framework that governs the enrolment for, and distribution of students to, schools and "school clusters"⁸ does not state clearly that there is a free choice of school on the part of the families. This does not, in practice, prevent certain groups of parents from using various strategies for accessing "centres of excellence" that are capable of ensuring that their pupils, as future professionals, have a less tortuous path and a more interesting and rewarding future. The empirical data on which we relied to conduct our analysis were collected from a questionnaire survey administered to a sample of 815 parents and guardians, distributed between three secondary schools (*Alpha* school, *Kappa* school, and *Delta* school) in the city of *Vila Formosa*⁹. In the

selection of the sample there was concern regarding the representativeness of the diversity of courses offered in each of the three centres, as well as the proportion of the number of students per year group (year 10, year 11 and year 12). What follows is a brief description of the sample which produced our data.

The role of legal guardian is assumed, in the majority of cases, by the parents of the pupils, and in the majority of cases, by mothers (58.3% of mothers as opposed to 31.9% of fathers). In 5% of the cases, the guardians are the students themselves. This is something understandable, as in secondary schooling, some of the students are of legal age.

With respect to the levels of schooling, we considered the distribution of parents in the three schools that the pupils attended, we then merged the educational level of the father and the mother, and merged the corresponding levels of diploma, degree, master and doctorate into a single category: higher education.

As can be easily seen in the analysis of Table 1, in the case of the parents of the *Delta* school, the weighing of the first two levels of education considered (primary and secondary) is significantly higher than the weighing of the same levels in the sample as a whole. However, in the *Kappa* and *Alpha* schools, the percentage of parents that only finished secondary school is lower than the percentage value of the sample. Note, for example, that 31% of the parents of the *Delta* school only completed primary schooling, whilst in the *Kappa* school the weighing of this level of education goes down approximately by half

⁸ In Portugal a "school cluster" (agrupamiento de escuelas) is a set of schools (several kindergardens, primary schools and secondary schools) that share the same educational project, head teacher and school board.

⁹ Vila Formosa (an alias used for convenience) is a town in the north of Portugal that groups together various secondary school establishments, both public and private. In order to study the "arguments for choice" of school, three state schools were selected. Considering

the aims of the study, the geographic proximity of the schools was decisive (located in the town centre) as well as the diversity of the curriculum pathways available. Initially it was contemplated to include a private school, which was also based in the same town. However, despite much effort, we did not receive any response from the school management.

TABLE 1. Educational level of the pupil's father and mother

	Total		Delta School		Kappa School		Alpha School	
	Frecuencias	%	Frecuencias	%	Frecuencias	%	Frecuencias	%
Primary Schooling	362	22	170	31	83	16.1	109	19.1
Preparatory Schooling	322	19.7	128	23.4	90	17.5	104	18.3
Basic Schooling	254	15.5	60	11	99	19.2	95	16.7
Secondary Schooling	332	20.3	103	18.8	99	19.2	130	22.8
Higher Education	326	20	78	14.2	125	24.3	123	21.7
Non-valid Answers	2	0.12	1	0.18	0	0	1	0.17
Don't know/ No answer	31	1.9	7	1.2	18	3.5	6	0.10
Total	1,629	99.5	547	99.8	514	99.8	568	98.9

(16.1%). The disadvantage of the *Delta* school has also been verified regarding the percentage of parents with an education level corresponding to higher education: 14.2% in the *Delta* school as opposed to 21.7% in the *Alpha* school and 24.3% in the *Kappa* school.

"Arguments" for school choice: Between "process" and "product".

We focus now on the question that is central to the objectives of this analysis: the factors that were most important when it came to choosing a school for the learners to attend¹⁰. We used a closed multiple-choice question to obtain answers from our surveyed sample. 11 alternative answers were provided, plus the

option of "Other", where the respondents who chose this option were asked to specify exactly "what it was". For each of the factors studied, the parents had to answer by way of a four-point Likert scale with the following alternatives: *very important; important; slightly important; not important*.

Along with factors contemplated in the legislation governing the enrolment for, and distribution of, students in schools, the selection of possible "reasons" for choice of school included some "arguments" referred to in the studies concerning the choice of school. By resorting to a closed question we are aware that we risk a bias arising due to the so-called "question effect", despite including the alternative "Other". However, if we had opted for an open question, we would have encountered other issues. A first reading of the frequency of the answers given by parents for each of the factors for choosing a school led us to conclude that those factors have a reasonable discriminating power, especially in value of "very important". In effect, the difference in the frequency of the answers for the various factors analysed is very significant; the most chosen factor was selected 543 times, whilst the least chosen

¹⁰ It is important to clarify here that the study intended to identify the reasons for the choice of school for entry into secondary education. In Portugal, the transition from basic education (9 years), to secondary school education (3 years) involves, for the majority of students, a change of school. When we sent out the questionnaires to the parents, basic schooling was obligatory. From the 2012-2013 school year onwards, schooling was compulsory for 12 years (9 years of basic schooling plus 3 years of secondary schooling).

at that level of importance recorded only 53 responses¹¹.

The figure 1 shows the totalled data on the occurrence of the categories referred to as “very important” and “important” in relation to the factors taken into account in the choice of school¹². The factor “having the desired curriculum pathway” occupied the first position, with 747 answers (91.6%). The answer “the school prepares the children well for examinations” was in the 2nd place: 708 respondents (86.8%) considered that this factor was at least “important” and only 16 of respondents (2%) considered it “not important”. The high level of consensus on the importance of this factor shows the importance of “instrumentalism” in the arguments for choice (cf. Van Zanten, 2009: 26).

In the 3rd place was “disciplined atmosphere in school”. 675 of respondents (82.8%) included this as either being “very important” or “important” when it came to choosing a school for their children¹³. The “reputation of the school” and the “high level of effort required” was placed in the 4th and 5th place respectively, with very close values¹⁴. “Proximi-

ty to place of residence” and “proximity to place of work”, whilst being included in the group of priorities when covering the capacity available in each school, were not considered to be a priority. It was surprising to see the low number of respondents who thought that “the school’s position in the *league tables* published in newspapers” was “important” for the choice of school. This factor occupied the 10th and last but one place, with only 87 answers (10.7%). This data appear to weaken the case for the argument(s) frequently made by the defenders and promoters of the publications of school “*league tables*” based on exam results. The publication of *league tables* has been justified by saying that it is in the parents’ interest, with the aim to provide information for them to make informed choices. However, our respondents did not seem to recognise the importance of this when it came to choose a school.

In summary, when it comes to choosing a school, parents, as well as the basic requirement that the school should have the desired curriculum path, above all value examination preparation, a disciplined atmosphere, the reputation of the school, the demands it places on the students, the quality of the facilities and, to a lesser extent, the school’s openness to parent involvement. On the contrary, the proximity of the school to the workplace, the position of the school in the *league tables* published in the newspapers, the presence of siblings or friends and even the proximity to the place of residence seem to have less importance in the decision to enrol their children in a certain school. These “conclusions” somewhat overlap with the “reasons” found in other studies, but they also show some idiosyncrasies. For example, as in other

¹¹ We compared only the explicitly stated factors that arose. We left to one side the factor “Other” because, as is usually the case in questionnaires of this type, few interviewees selected it.

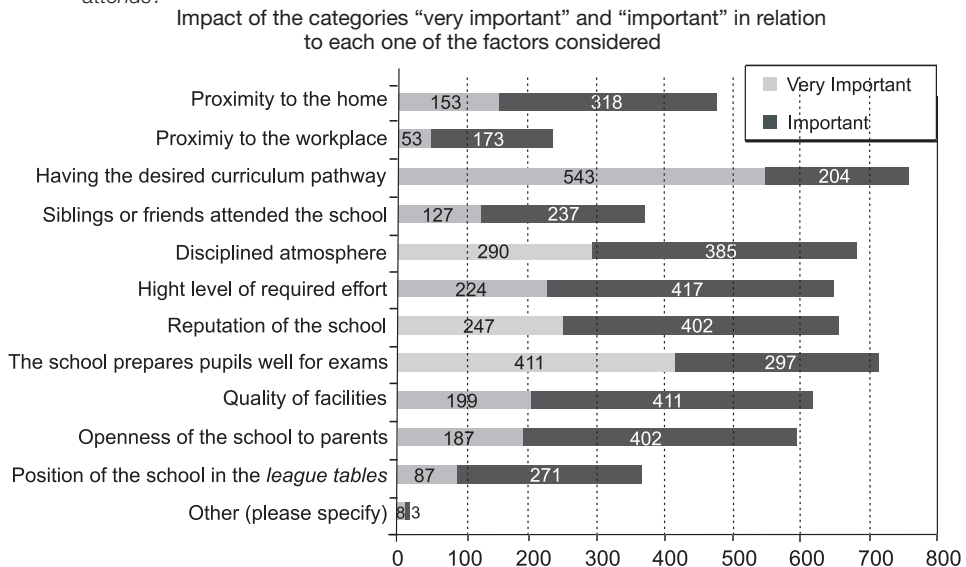
¹² As can be seen in the figure, the “hierarchy” of “arguments for choice” remains the same, whether considering only the category “very important”, or adding the data regarding the levels “very important” and “important”.

¹³ In the study carried out by Adler et al (1989) in Scotland, the factor related to the school having the best reputation for discipline was also considered to be one of the most important reasons for the choice of school by parents in the transition to secondary schooling. Within the long list of 32 factors used by those authors, “good discipline” occupied the 3rd place in two of the three “school districts” (LEAs) from where the sample was taken. In the other LEA (Local Education Authority), the reputation of the school for good discipline occupied the 4th place (cf. Adler et al, 1989).

¹⁴ Once again we find parallels between our results and those of the study conducted by Adler’s et al. (1989).

The factor related to the school making pupils work harder (“the school makes its pupils work harder”) used in Adler’s et al. ranked between 4th and 7th out of the 32 “reasons” considered.

FIGURE 1. *What was the importance of the factors indicated below for the choice of school that your child attends?*



studies, "discipline" was valued; but "preparing well for examinations" in our research had a relevance that seemed to go beyond what was found in other studies. In this regard, the "product" criterion seemed to have more importance than that of "process"¹⁵, with the "educational" qualities of the school being apparently placed above non-educational concerns, such as the closeness to the home. This last factor, which in our sample occupied a secondary position, has been referred to in other studies as one of the main reasons for parents to choose a certain school (cf. Adler et al, 1989: 133-134).

¹⁵ We have taken here the terms product and process as criteria for choosing a school, in the sense attributed by Elliott et al (1981), and cited by Adler et al (1989: 95). Regarding product, choices were included that gave priority to academic results, specifically those that were to do with the school's scores in examinations. In terms of process, the choices were those that gave priority to the well-being and happiness of the child, in the scope of what the authors called the "humanist perspective", as opposed to the "technological perspective" of product advocates.

STANDARDISED RESULTS AND DISCREPANCIES. DOES THE CONCENTRATION OF PUBLIC ARISE FROM PARENTAL MOBILISATION OR FROM A RATIONALISED ACTION?

Up to now we have chosen to analyse the answers given to the questions in terms of the factors that influence the choice of school by parents in the transition to secondary schooling and no cross-referencing has been carried out as yet with any of the variables that characterise our sample. At this point we wish to correlate the different reasons for choice with the different organisational contexts in which the study was carried out, and with some of the characteristics of the survey population.

The first piece of data to highlight is that the different educational levels of the parents show less statistically significant associations¹⁶ with the different "arguments for choi-

¹⁶ Associations were considered statistically significant when $p \leq 0.05$

ce” than the variable *school that the pupil attends*. We actually found differences between respondents from the three schools, whilst there were fewer discrepancies between the segments of parents with different levels of education. In the following sections we will try to document these irregularities and discrepancies based on the importance conferred on the set of factors that affect the choice of school valued by respondents, by cross-referencing them with some of the variables that characterise our sample. We will then develop the analysis closely following the hierarchy of the choice factors indicated by the parents. We will start with the factor “having the desired curriculum pathway” which, as mentioned before, was classified as “very important” by 543 respondents (66.6%) and as “important” by another 204 respondents (25%). Since almost the total number of respondents (91.6%) considered it to be at least “important”, the answers were distributed in a relatively proportional way in the three organisational contexts, the same as when the different completed educational levels are taken into account.

On the one hand, it could seem obvious that “having the desired curriculum pathway” would be an important requisite in choosing a school to go to. However, this high *rate* could also be surprising, as for the majority of the respondents’ children, all the curriculum pathways were available in all of the schools in *Vila Formosa* and therefore, regardless of the desired curriculum pathway, any one of the schools could have been chosen. However, our respondents, rather than indicating whether this factor was or was not, *in fact*, important in their case, may have considered earlier, *in the abstract*, the importance of taking into account if the desired curriculum pathway was available when it came to choosing a school.

“Preparing students well for examinations” occupied the second place in the classification of the most important factors. In fact, 86.8% of respondents (708) distributed

their answers between the scale categories “very important” and “important”. Regardless of whether the school, the educational level of the parents, or the pathway studied were taken into account, the large majority of respondents considered it “important” or “very important” to prepare well for examinations. However, when we isolated the “very important” category, some differences between schools were identified. *Alpha* registered the highest percentage of answers at that end of the scale (57.2%).

TABLE 2. Degree of importance attributed by parents to the factor “preparing well for examinations”, according to the school attended by the pupil

	Very Imp.	
	Frecuencies	%
Alpha School (n: 269)	154	57.2
Delta School (n: 274)	126	45.9
Kappa School (n: 270)	131	48.5

To compensate, the lowest percentage (45%) was found in the *Delta* school, immediately followed by *Kappa*, with 48.5% of those surveyed considering that the factor “to prepare well for examinations” was very important in their choice of school. These data are consistent with the *public image* associated with each of the three schools¹⁷ and inter-

¹⁷ In the interviews carried out in another phase of the study with school managers of the various centres offering secondary education in the town of Vila Formosa, the Alpha school came to be systematically presented as the reference school, the fashionable school and, in some cases, as the “good school for preparing the elites”. For its part, the Kappa school, geographically very close to the Alpha school, is in a privileged position in terms of the public it serves, but, for reasons that the school head interviewed considered to be “the school’s fault”, lost some of its capacity to attract the best pupils, reflected in its position in the league tables. Lastly, the Delta school is clearly serving a public from less affluent social groups. The average educational level of the parents of the children who attend this school is the lowest registered. This school also occupies a more modest

estingly replicate their relative position in the national *league tables* built on the basis of examination results over the last few years. A higher percentage of the "very important" category corresponds, symmetrically, to a better position in the national *school rankings*¹⁸.

The statistically significant association between the importance attributed to good preparation for examinations and the successful or unsuccessful school trajectory of the student needs to be highlighted. The parents of those students who did not have to repeat courses tend to value good preparation for examinations more than the parents of those students who had to repeat at least one course, above all when the repetition happened in the 3rd cycle. We saw a positive association between valuing preparation for examinations and how well the parents were informed about the various options available in year 10 (start of secondary education in Portugal) At the same time, having more information about school curriculum and pathways was positively associated with the education level of the parents; the parents with higher education levels stated that they were better informed about possible curriculum pathways for their children in year 10.

Considering preparing well for exams to be important was associated with the variables concerning the curriculum pathway followed by pupils and the educational level of the parents, both of which are related. A significant covariation was observed between the parents' educational level and the curriculum options chosen by their children. In the technological and professional pathways there was a strong presence of students whose parents had an education level equal or lower to year 9. In our sample, for exam-

ple, in the case of pupils taking the Technology pathways, with Civil Engineering and Building, Mechanics and Electronic Technology and Electronics courses, there was not a single parent with an educational level higher than secondary.

"Disciplined atmosphere in the school" occupied the third position within the factors considered to be most important. The recognition of the importance of this aspect was distributed relatively uniformly amongst the different segments of parents' educational level, although there is a slight predominance of the "very important" category amongst those parents with higher education. However, this association is only found in one of the three schools: the *Delta* school. In this school, whilst 38 parents (25.9%) with an education level equal to or lower than the 2nd cycle recognised the disciplined atmosphere in the school to be "very important" as a reason for choosing a school, the percentage of those who gave it the same degree of importance rose to 50% (19) amongst the parents with higher education. Significant variations were not observed between schools in the assessment of discipline as a factor for school choice. In the overall "very Important" and "important" sets of answers, the three schools showed percentages that ranged between a minimum of 86.6% (*Delta* school) and a maximum of 88.3% (*Kappa* school). However, once again, if we concentrate on the category showing the highest value, the *Alpha* school is above the rest. The percentage of parents who, in this school, considered a disciplined atmosphere to be "very important" in choosing a school exceeds by almost 10 points the value of the school with the lower percentage value of this level of importance.

"School reputation" occupied the fourth position in the most valued set of "arguments for choice", something that was also seen to be associated with the parents' educational level. Despite being valued by a large part of our sample, statistically significant differen-

level in national league tables, and the lowest of the three schools at the time studied.

¹⁸ We refer to the rankings devised by the media between 2001 and 2008.

TABLE 3. Degree of importance attributed by parents to the factor “school reputation” according to the school attended by the pupil

	Very Imp.		Important		Frecuencias (a+b)	%
	Frecuencias a)	%	Frecuencias b)	%		
Alpha School (n: 269)	116	43.1	123	45.7	239	88.8
Delta School (n: 274)	63	22.9	142	51.8	205	74.8
Kappa School (n: 270)	68	25.1	137	50.7	205	75.8

ces were observed between the different categories of those surveyed when they were arranged in terms of educational level. These differences stand out more when looking at the “very important” level of the scale. Its importance gradually rose until the educational level of the respondent reached secondary schooling, and then dropped when the level of schooling reached higher education¹⁹. Therefore, we found the greater percentage of those that consider school prestige to be “very important” as a factor in choosing a school among those parents who finished secondary schooling. However, the most significant difference in how this factor is valued as an “argument for choice” arises when we use the school attended by the pupil as a variable.

The importance given to the “argument for choice” referred to as “prestige of school” constitutes another aspect that differentiates the *Alpha* school from the other two schools. In relative terms, the percentage of the parents at this school that ranked this variable as “very important” almost doubled the percentage of those who held this variable in a similar regard in the other two schools. When we add the number of those who chose “very important” and “important”, the difference between schools decreases and the *Alpha* school continues to be the leader, with a rea-

sonable advantage of nearly 14 percentage points (cf. table above).

We now turn to the fifth most valued factor in choosing a school: “the high level of effort required”. Here, we also found an association between those who value it and their educational level. Whilst only 18% of parents with primary education considered this to be worthy of the highest rating, in the case of parents with secondary education this percentage increased to 35.7%, and there was a slight decrease to 34% in those parents who had a degree²⁰. The problem then becomes of finding out if this could mean that the choice of parents with a low level of education is closer to the *ideal type* of “meaningful intention”. That is, if these parents see the school as a “space and time of growth that specifically values the welfare, the pleasure and happiness [of the child]” (Van Zanten, 2009:26) or rather, if other explanations cross or overlap with this²¹. As has already been seen with “school presti-

¹⁹ In the “higher education” level we include those holding diplomas, degrees, master’s degrees and doctorates.

²⁰ As has already been noted in the valuing of the school’s reputation, it was also parents with secondary education who valued the most the level of effort demanded of pupils when it came to choosing a school.

²¹ Van Zanten (2009), in her study, held that this expressive intention (*moratoire expressif*) is more frequent in “technical people”, the part of the middle class closest to the more popular classes. In this case the parents were less concerned about finding the most competitive and the hardest school in academic terms than about finding the most “human” school which would leave good memories in the child.

ge", when we cross-reference how the rating of "high level of effort required" with the school attended by the pupils, highly significant differences can be seen.

Whilst in the *Delta* school 17% of those surveyed considered the high degree of effort required from children to be "very important"; in the *Alpha* school 40.8% of parents ranked it this high; the parents of children in the *Kappa* school occupied a middle position, with 24.8%. Taking the categories of "very important" and "important" together, despite diluting the differences between the three schools, did not affect the *hierarchy* of how the factor was valued in each school under consideration. The *Alpha* School continued to have the leading position, with 85.8% of the parents considering the high level of effort required from the children important when it came to choosing a school. The *Kappa* school kept its intermediate position, with 80% of those that chose this level of importance and came closer to that of *Alpha*. The *Delta* school continued being the place where the high level of effort required was less valued as a reason to choose a school, which virtually translates in a less demanding academic profile.

The "quality of the facilities" occupied the sixth position as a factor that influenced school choice, within the range of factors under consideration by our respondents. Nearly 75% of parents (610) included this factor in the groups of "reasons" considered to be important, and of these around 1/3 considered the factor to be "very important". However, the importance of the value placed on this factor appeared to progress in inverse proportion to the hierarchy of the academic qualifications of the parents. That is, as the educational level of the parents increased, the percentage of those who considered the facilities to be a "very important" factor in their choice went down.

The "final result" is that, when evaluating the quality of the facilities, the number of pa-

rents with primary schooling who considered it "very important" was double the percentage of those who had completed a higher education level of schooling.

A higher level of "school's openness to the parents" does not seem to be, in relative terms, a strong "selling point" for the schools when it comes to attracting parents. In our sample, this factor occupied the seventh place in the parents' range of eleven "reasons" analysed, with nearly 72% of those surveyed thinking it important. The assessment of this factor did not show very significant variations within the different groupings of parents' educational level, or in the school attended by the pupil. We admit, however, that the broad meaning of the phrase "school's openness to the parents" may have made it difficult to interpret the apparently lower assessment of the importance given to "having a say" in the school as an "argument for choice".

Contrary to other pieces of research, those surveyed in our study gave secondary importance to "proximity to the home" when choosing a school. In the ranking of the most important factors, the criterion of the geographic location of the school occupied positions at the end of the table, be it in relation to the closeness to the home (8th position), or in relation to the closeness to the workplace (11th position). In other studies (e.g., Adler, *et al*, 1989) the criteria of closeness and ease of access were considered to be the most important factors in the choice of school by parents. However, this valuation has a different importance in each social class, and even in the different segments within the same class, as shown by Van Zanten (2009). In our study, when we cross-referenced the value of the closeness to home with the educational level of the parent, we can see that, surprisingly, and contrary to other studies, the value increases with the educational level of those surveyed. It seems that it is the parents with the highest study levels who give the most im-

portance to the closeness of the school to the home, an aspect that becomes more visible when we add the frequency of the “very important” and “important” categories.

The unexpected character of these data can be divided into two apparent “surprises”: i) it is the parents with the highest educational levels who most value a *non-educational* criterion in the choice of school; and ii) it is the parents with the lowest educational level, normally associated with a more humble social background, who apparently are least concerned about the distance between school and home. However, it is important to highlight the fact that, the differences of how this factor is valued between the different education levels are not significant from a percentage point of view, except in the case of parents with only primary-level schooling. This particular feature is inseparable from the spatial distribution of secondary schools in Portugal, which are normally located in city centres. In these circumstances, those students who live in rural areas (normally characterised by lower schooling levels) do not have the option of choosing between the neighbourhood school and one further away. Regardless of the school they choose, they always need to move outside of the village in which they live. As already mentioned, we found a statistically significant association between the distance that students travel to get to the school that they attend and the level of education of the parents, with a “penalty” for the least educated²².

On this occasion we can also see a statistically significant relationship between the importance given by the parent to the factor of “proximity to the home” and the school

that the child goes to. This relationship becomes statistically significant when adding the results for “very important” and “important”.

The difference of almost 20 percentage points between the *Alpha* and *Delta* schools translates into pronounced differences between how the criteria “proximity to home” is rated. Parents of children at the *Alpha* school are apparently more prepared to select schools that are located further from home, thus widening the range of possible choices. An analysis of the data relevant to the distance that students have to travel to school seems to indicate that the *Alpha* school receives students from a wider range²³. The parents whose children go to the *Delta* school, have the most limited options, as they give greater importance to the closeness to home element; more often than not, they choose a school based on distance. This tendency is confirmed for this school by the greater percentage of parents who live within a distance of under 1 km.

Lastly, the very modest place of the school in the *league tables* at the time of choosing a school should be noted. Of our overall sample, only close to 10% (87) attributed great importance to this “information”. On the other hand, 271 parents (33.3%) considered “important” the position of the school in the tables published by the press. This criterion is, apparently, less valued by those parents with higher education levels than by those who hold secondary education levels or lower. Given that the number of responses by educational level is relatively low, we established only two categories of educational level. Nevertheless, it is when the school variable is mentioned that the difference in the assessment of the *league tables* becomes accentuated.

²² It is important to clarify that the three schools (Alpha, Kappa and Delta) are located in the town of Vila Formosa, the first two being located more centrally, with the distance between them being approximately 500m, and the last being more on the periphery, approximately 1500m from the others.

²³ In fact, the Alpha school has an advantage when it comes to recruiting students from a distance of between 5 and 10 kilometres. In return, the Delta school serves, percentage-wise, more students within a distance of 1km or less.

TABLE 4. Degree of importance attributed by parents to the factor "proximity to home" according to the school attended by the pupil

	Very Imp.		Important			
	Frecuencias a)	%	Frecuencias b)	%	Frecuencias (a+b)	%
Alpha school (n: 269)	42	15.6	89	33.0	131	48.6
Delta school (n: 274)	65	23.7	120	43.8	185	67.5
Escuela Kapa school (n: 270)	46	17.0	109	40.5	155	57.4

The *Alpha* School attracts, at a reasonable distance from the other two, the greater percentage of parents who value the "league tables" factor as a source of information for choosing a school. When considering the "very important" rating in isolation, or added to the "important" category, this school has a clear over-representation of parents who claim to attribute importance to the schools in terms of examination results. In the *Delta* school only 33.2% of those surveyed considered information about *league tables* to be important; whilst 59.1% of the parents from the *Alpha* school considered it "important". It is essential to mention that in this school, as opposed to the other two, it is the parents with a degree who value the position of the school in the *league tables* the most as a criterion for choosing a school. This is another indicator that suggests that this school is the most sought after by those parents who, regardless of their educational level, show a more proactive behaviour when it comes to choosing a school and access the "sanctuaries of excellence in order" to ensure some very relevant competitive advantages. This attitude can be understood in the context of a growing "school inflation" (Duru-Bellat, 2006) and the consequent devaluation of diplomas which, in the words of Canário *et al.* (2001: 150), "makes them simultaneously essential and increasingly less profitable." In fact, as highlighted by Van Zanten (2009) in line with other research, considering the

possibility of choosing a school is not exclusive to middle-class parents. Adhesion to the "principle of free choice" may even be more frequent among working-class parents, although this segment of the population is where the biggest gap is seen between conforming to this principle and actually "taking action". On the other hand, "the majority of research shows that when it is a question of taking action in terms of choice, these parents are the ones that choose the least" (p. 11). One of the main reasons that explains this imbalance between wish and "action-taking" regarding the choice of school arises from the considerable amount of cultural, economic, and social "capital" necessary to effectively make these choices; additionally, as has already been discussed, there is a very unequal social distribution of capital.

CONCLUSION

To understand the way in which different categories of parents organise their "hierarchies of excellence", as shown by their preferred "arguments for choice", is one of the central objectives of this paper. We must admit, however, that the nature of the empirical material on which our analysis is based (answers to a questionnaire-driven survey) did not allow us to establish precise limits between the rationale underlying "hierarchies of excellence", related to social relationships and processes included in the universe of

TABLE 5. Degree of importance attributed by parents to the factor “position of the school in the league tables published in the press” according to the school attended by the pupil

	Very Imp.		Important			
	Frecuencias a)	%	Frecuencias b)	%	Frecuencias (a+b)	%
Alpha School (n: 269)	48	17.8	111	41.2	159	59.1
Delta School (n: 274)	17	6.2	74	27.0	91	33.2
Kapa School (n: 270)	22	8.1	86	31.8	108	40.0

respondents, or in the socio-educational context being analysed.

Despite this constraint, we observed some “tendencies” that we consider appropriate to highlight. In the three schools studied, the parents or guardians with different educational levels were differently sensitive to different aspects: for example, compared to other segments of respondents, parents with an educational level equal to, or above, secondary schooling, emphasised the importance of preparing well for examinations and the effort required from the pupils, whereas the quality of the facilities was less relevant for them. However, it cannot be concluded that, in general, the scale of priorities and the ratings (in the “important” and “very important” categories) of the basic factors for the choice of school presents considerable differences between the segments of different educational levels. If, on the one hand, this apparent convergence in valuing/not valuing the battery of factors subjected to assessment of choice may seem somewhat unexpected²⁴, on the other hand, it should be noted that convergence cannot be taken as being equivalent to a common rationale amongst the overall sets of parents, since it can undoubtedly be the

result of very different *reasons*²⁵. To a plurality of reasons for assessing a given factor must also be added the “breadth of meaning” that such factor may have had for the different respondents. Thus, for example, expressions such as “school reputation” may have different meanings for the different respondents, these differences being associated, specifically, to the different conceptions of a “good school” held by the subjects²⁶.

Amongst those surveyed in the three schools we found significant differences in the frequency of answers in terms of the importance attributed to some factors for the choice of school. The importance given to the “high level of effort required” and “reputation of the school” factors show a statistically significant correlation with the school that students attend. When looking

²⁵ For example, not valuing the factor “proximity to the school” could mean either having the availability (and resources) to look for schools further afield because “quality” is much valued; or it could mean that, as a result of the lack of availability at a certain school level in the town, an answer needs to be looked for further away from the place of residence, given the absence of any other alternative.

²⁶ Something that cannot be forgotten is the individual meaning that each respondent gives to the task of answering a questionnaire. As stated by Walford (1994), regarding the methodological problems when asking parents why they chose a school, “in any interview or questionnaire study, respondents often want to present themselves as rational decision-makers, but the reality may be that the decision was made by default or with little consideration, or that idiosyncratic elements were the decisive factors in the choice (p. 51)”.

²⁴ “Unexpected” by reference to some research data that point to the conclusion that “various parents make choices differently” and that the distribution of educational levels constitutes a basis for differentiation (Walford, 1994: 123).

at the surveys from the *Alpha* school, if compared with those from the other schools studied, they tended to show a greater adhesion to the signs of what constitutes a "good" school, a "fashionable" school, which are embodied in the *effort required*, in *reputation* and position in the *league tables*, whereas less sensibility was shown towards factors such as geographical closeness. At the same time, those surveyed from the *Delta* school were, compared to the others surveyed, considerably more attentive to the proximity of the schools, whilst the school requiring a great effort, and its reputation weighed less on their decision.

In summary, based on the aggregate data from the three schools, we find it problematic to define *hierarchies of excellence* based on the different *choice models* susceptible of being related to the social relationships selected (translated into variables) to sociologically characterise the surveyed population, in particular those related to completed educational level. Does this mean that the *school factor* could lead to "divided opinions" between segments of the school public, in a way that overrides or blurs the contours defined by typically considered social relationships, such as the possessing of academic qualifications? We do not believe that this can be stated based on such a fragile empirical basis. But we argue that, from the analysis of the data studied, it is promising to retain this line of investigation: it is plausible to think that the selection by academic performance may cause subjects that would otherwise be differentiated, based on other sociological relationships and properties, to move together. This movement is exactly what social mobility, as a basic phenomenon with an individual impact and basis, consists of in certain dimensions.

The collected data allowed us to verify that the *Alpha* school, when compared to the other two, was of most interest to the parents who showed a greater preference

for "choice factors" to do with academic qualities, and were less concerned with instrumental and pragmatic factors, such as proximity. That is, this school, in agreement with the typology proposed by Barroso and Viseu (2003: 911), could be placed in the category of "attractive and mobilised schools", as it simultaneously shows a high demand from parents (and pupils) and a pedagogic dynamism that could be seen in the diversity of pedagogic projects reported to us. Whether because this exercised a *magnetic* attraction on the parents who most valued scholarly attributes, or because the *filter* used to resolve the problem of a demand higher than the offer,²⁷ it retained pupils whose parents valued these very properties. The final result seemed to be a greater concentration of parents who, besides (and beyond) having on average a higher level of education, preferred a *hierarchy of excellence* that highlighted properties centred on the "product", mainly derived from the apparent academic qualities of the school.

However, this reading of the data should be taken with a good degree of caution because, as was recognised in other studies (Adler et al., 1989; Gewirtz et al., 1995), to identify "reasons" for choosing a school from an ordered list ("menu approach"), besides presupposing that a social actor is guided by a hyper-rationality (Sfez, 1990), also hides a potential bias caused by the alternatives (not) taken into account²⁸. It

²⁷ In fact, in the interview with one headteacher, we were told that this filter included, once the legally determined criteria for matriculation have been exhausted, a measure approved by the school's Pedagogic Council (Consejo Pedagógico) of eliminating those candidates with the worst academic performance.

²⁸ As Adler et al. (1989) expressively showed, the mere format of the questions (open or closed) may lead to "reasons" for choice that were not even contemplated in the closed questions (because they were not expected) appearing in top positions when the question is presented in an open format. As stated by the authors, closed questions can only be constructed if the answers

needs to be added that, in our case, the questionnaire was administered at the end of the school year; so those surveyed were required to reconstruct a procedure that, in some cases, had happened almost a year earlier (for the students of year 10) and for the majority, two or three years earlier (for the students of year 11 and 12). We admit also that, as a line of future study, the hypothesis that the uneven concentration of parents who, apparently, valued different arguments for selection in the three schools, could be related either to the variables included in the equation at the time of making the choice; or to the perceived (and assessed) characteristics in the school which their children attended at the time of the survey. If this hypothesis is confirmed, at least in relation to certain selected factors, the “hierarchies of excellence” could be, in some cases, the reflection of the characteristics that those surveyed recognised in the school where their children were studying and, in other cases, a projected image of the idealised school²⁹. We cannot discard, as mentioned above, the effect of institutional pressures generated by regulatory and cognitive isomorphism with the stereotype of “good parent/responsible parent” (Sá, 2007) and the respondents’ concern to give an image of themselves as being competent, rational actors (Walford, 1994).

As Gewirtz *et al.* (1995: 6) advised, the process of choosing a school is much more confusing, intuitive, multidimensional and irrational than the tools designed to capture it admit. Also, to comprehend its contextual nature, technical and methodology tools are needed that are sensitive to local idiosyncrasies and to the diversity of underlying

capitals, since as we recognise, such nature is not recoverable by the relative rigidity of a questionnaire survey. As the same authors argue, “choice means different things to different people in different settings” (Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995: 23). Thus, for example, the convergences or the discrepancies regarding “arguments for choice” in different categories of parents can only be decoded when they are returned to the intelligibility frameworks that mark their meaning(s). As stated by Denzin and Lincoln (1998: xvii), “all knowledge is always local, situated in a local culture and embedded in organisational sites”. The clarification of some of the uncertainties with which we are faced anticipates a *return to the field*. We hope that we will then be armed with a technical-methodological arsenal more sensitive to the subtlety and density of the Actors’ discourse.

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are already known (*ibid.*).

²⁹ That is, for example, classifying “good preparation for examinations” as “very important”, may both inform us about the relevance of that factor as an “argument of choice”, and translate it into a statutory expectation in connection with the school’s mandates.

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