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TÍTULO: Los padres, la selección de escuela pública y las desigualdades: reflexiones basadas en algunas investigaciones.

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RESUMEN: Este artículo se basa en la elección de la escuela por parte de los padres, según la perspectiva de la sociología de la educación crítica, basada en el trabajo pionero de Gewirtz, Ball y Bowe (1995). En este marco, se realiza una investigación sobre estudios empíricos, llevada a cabo con padres, centrada en la intersección entre la elección de la escuela por parte de los padres y el grupo dentro de la estructura social a la que pertenecen. Se concluye, que los recursos necesarios para el ejercicio de elección de la escuela no es igual entre los diferentes grupos sociales, y una de las razones para la elección está relacionado con su "entorno social".

PALABRAS CLAVES: padres, elección, escuela, desigualdades, investigación empírica.

TITLE: Parents, choice of public school and inequalities: reflexions based on some researches.

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ABSTRACT: This article is based on the choice of the school by parents, according to the perspective of the sociology of critical education, based on the pioneering work of Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe (1995). In this framework, a research on empirical studies was done, carried out with parents, focused on the intersection between the choice of the school by the parents and the group

within the social structure to which they belong. It is concluded that the resources necessary for the election exercise of the school is not the same among the different social groups, and one of the reasons for the choice is related to their "social environment".

KEY WORDS: parents, choice, school, inequalities, empirical research.

INTRODUCTION.

In this article, we take as our core subject the empirical research on parents' choice of school. It ought to be said that the choice among public schools has been, in different countries, a matter of explicit public policy, since the final years of the eighties and during the decade of the nineties. Thus, the sociologists of education have shown an increasing interest by the subject of parents' choice of school. On the other hand, it is also true that in the case of countries where the public policies do not aim at an explicit choice of the school, this issue is a topic of investigation as well, right away, because the attitudes of the families have been undergoing a change, in this subject, with an increased interest on school choice¹.

In both situations, therefore, studies are being developed in the field of the sociology of education, namely within the frame of the critic sociology, which focuses on the choice and on the process of the construction of schooling inequalities in contemporary societies; even though these studies are scanty.

In spite of the importance of the analysis of the policies concerning parents' choice of school, as well as of the character somewhat specific of this *new way of parents' participation* in the education of their children², in this article we seek to focus, exclusively, on empirical studies

¹ We ought not to ignore that the possibility of choice of school may be transmitted to the parents in different ways and, therefore, influence them in their choice. Thus, it is not only the implementation of policies that leads to the choice of school. We can point out, as an example, the divulgation of these policies among countries, favourable opinions to the school choice process published in the media and, also, movements of civil society in defense of that choice. Parents may develop, in contexts of policies less favorable to this possibility, diverse and subtle strategies to choose a school.

² This new way of participation redefines parents as *consumers*. Within this frame, access to the control of the school becomes diminute, since, as Vicent (1996, pp-38-39) states, in the wake of Hirschamn (1970), *parents, as consumers*, are offered an *exit*, but not a *voice*; parents are, therefore, inhibited from influencing the decisions taken by the schools.

concerning the choice of school. Specifically, we seek to bring to discussion studies developed with parents, which cross reasons for school choosing with parents' socio-economic group. Within this scope, we take as a reference, the pioneering work of Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe (1995), in which the authors build a typology of three great groups of parents, based on their strategies of school choosing, largely influenced by the social class to which the families belong.

The weight of inequalities and parents' right of choosing schools: some theoretical notes.

Different sociologists of education consider that the choice of school by parents is yet another mechanism, in the field of public education, of the *reproduction of inequalities in school*, insofar as it reproduces a possession of cultural resources that can decode the elements at stake in the moment of choosing a school.

Right away, Ball (1995, p.215) reports that the choice of school is largely related to “ethnic and class differences in the access to schools and in the distribution of students among them. Thus, parents' choice of school assumes “certain abilities, skills and possibilities (time, transportation, etc.) that are unevenly distributed through the population”. In other words, in this *game*, “the skills and predispositions for choice, and the cultural capital that can be invested in choice, are features that do not exist generally in the population” (Ball, 1995, p. 216).

The cultural capital plays a key role in these processes, to the extent that, insofar as “certain types and quantities of cultural capital are required, to make it possible for one person to make an active and strategic choice”. The author exemplifies: the knowledge of the local schools; the access to the relevant information and the ability to read and decipher it; the ability to engage in the ‘promotional’ activities of the schools (such as parties, printed materials and videos), and to decipher them; the ability to maximize choice by ‘manipulating the system’ (such as, for example, doing multiple enrollments, requesting scholarships, etc.), and the ability to engage in activities involving a positive image presentation of the parent (Ball, 1995, p. 217).

In the same sense, Resende, Nogueira & Nogueira (2011) summarizes the result of different investigations, which demonstrate that the selection criteria vary among the different social groups, “less educated parents, and those belonging to lower socio-economic classes, tend to focus on practical and functional criteria, such as: proximity of their area of residence, availability of transportation, etc”. On the other hand, as the authors alert: families socially best-positioned tend to use criteria internal to the educational processes, such as the performance of the institution in large systemic reviews, the philosophy and the teaching methods adopted, the additional activities offered, and in general, the ambiance of the institution. These families would tend, more than the first ones, to worry about choosing a school that is best suited to the psychological characteristics and to the school child-specific profile, anticipating, thus, possible inadequacies (Resende, Nogueira & Nogueira, 2011, p. 956).

According to Resende, Nogueira & Nogueira (2011, p. 957), “the choice of the educational institution by families is revealed as a phenomenon that shows, quite clearly, the weight of the social inequalities in determining school trajectories”. Specifically, it states that “the families that have more economic and cultural resources have better conditions to choose, are more prone to do so, use the academically most relevant criteria, obtain more information and are more apt to use it” (*ibid.*). Therefore, it seems that the choice of school is, in the first place, an issue that concerns the families who enjoy a good economic situation and/or a proximity to school culture (cf. Barroso, 2003, p. 93). It seems that the parents of a higher socio-economic status are, precisely, the ones who take into consideration, not only the *quality of the school*, as we have already mentioned, but also the *quality* of the students.

On the other hand, as the socially disadvantaged groups are concerned, their “inability or their lack of will to participate in those aspects of the process of ‘choice’, or their ignorance regarding those aspects, within certain groups of classes, represent a form of that which Bourdieu & Passeron (1990) call ‘self-exclusion’ – a process based, perhaps, on the belief that the system doesn’t work for them” (Ball, 1995, p.217).

In spite of these theoretical considerations, and also, of the knowledge resulting from some investigations, that point to inequalities in the exercise of the choice of school by the parents, the studies, in this line of thought, are scanty, particularly the ones about disadvantaged groups of the population.

In the investigation produced, one detects mainly studies that focus only, namely with the involvement of parents themselves, generically, on the criteria for choosing, and which do not cross the families' profiles/socio-economic typologies and their choice of the educational institution. In this line of research, as we have already mentioned, we ought to highlight the pioneering work of Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe, published in 1995, in which the authors, taking as their starting point the speech of parents about the choice of the school, built a typology of families strongly related to their social class belonging. Thus, with the objective to know and reflect upon more recent studies, we have realized a small-scale investigation, that we shall present in the following sections.

Some empirical investigations on families' typology/profile and choice of school: an exploratory exercise.

Methodological notes.

The most recent research on parents' choice of school, the work on crossing parents' socio-economic profiles/typologies with the choice of school is scanty. In order for us to find studies that have this focus, we resorted to new forms of research *on line*, with merely an exploratory and experimental character. Thus, we carried out a search on the web browser *Google*. The search was conducted in two languages, Portuguese and Spanish, so as to diversify, in this analysis, the countries to be included, without becoming restricted to the Anglo-Saxon universe. This research was realized during the month of March of 2007, using two sets of words 'escolha do estabelecimento de ensino e pais' [school choice and parents] and 'ecoger la escuela e padres'.

We checked the first ten references that appeared for each set of words, and we selected only the works that were published in scientific magazines. We should like to stress that, among these first ten references, which appeared in each search, only one of them, in each search, was related to the focal point that interested us: parents' choice of school and the group in which they fit within the social structure, with an empirical component concerning parents. Some researches on the reasons of parents' choice of school also appeared, but without crossing the data with parents' social group of belonging; the latter were excluded, since they deviated from our point of interest.

Given the reduced number of investigations that we have found, we assume our present work as one having an exploratory character, with no intention of generalization or representativity, being possible, only, to identify some trends concerning its conclusions. We shall, therefore, analyze three studies on school choice with a similar focus, to identify, on one hand, similar conclusions, and on the other hand, elements which are original to each of the studies.

The first study that we found is related to the Brazilian reality, since our search in Portuguese language ended up including this country. The authors of this work are Resende, Nogueira & Nogueira (2011), which is entitled *Choice of school and family profiles: another facet of school inequalities*. The second work is about the Spanish reality, whose authors are Alegre Canosa & Benito Pérez (2012), which is entitled *What do families take into consideration when they choose their children's school? Eligibility and rejection factors in the town of Barcelona*³.

In a brief description of these empirical investigations, it is worth mentioning that the first one took place between the years 2005 and 2009, as part of a broader study, which directly involved students' parents or their guardians, with a total of 299 households of a city in Brazil, belonging to low and medium-low classes, studying in different types of educational institutions (private schools, State schools, and municipal schools well positioned in rankings, and in other State and municipal schools). The researchers used a questionnaire to interview families. The second

³ The original titles are in Portuguese and Spanish languages. For easiness of understanding, in the body of the text, we translated them to English.

research mentioned took place between the years 2008 and 2009, also in the context of a broader study, involving families in the city of Barcelona, in which the researchers used a questionnaire applied to about 5.000 families, resorting to 103 interviews.

We should like to remember that our goal is to compare these studies with the one by Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe (1995), in which the authors conducted an investigation that encompassed three geographical areas of the town of London, between the years 1991 and 1994, and interviewed 137 parents with children who were in a situation of transition from elementary school to the next educational cycle.

In the following chart, we synthesize this information, relative to the three studies.

Chart 1: Brief characterization of the studies under analysis.

Authors.	Title.	Country.	Way of Collecting data.	Number of parents involved.	Date of realization of the investigation.
Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe.	<i>School choice, social class and distinction: the realization of social advantage in education.</i>	England	Interview.	137	1991 to 1994.
Resende, Nogueira & Nogueira.	<i>Choice of school and family profiles: another facet of school inequalities.</i>	Brazil	Questionnaires.	299	2005 to 2009.
Alegre Canosa & Benito Pérez.	<i>What do families take into consideration when they choose their children's school? Eligibility and rejection factors in the town of Barcelona.</i>	Spain	QuestionnairesI nterviews	5.000 103	2008 to 2009.

A complex view on studies about inequalities and parents' school choice: *old* and *new* trends.

The analysis to the set of results obtained by the three studies that we have mentioned, allow us to retain a first datum: the behaviors and attitudes of families, when the time comes for them to

choose a school are not homogeneous, being characterized by significant differences of strategies, depending on their social and economic status and on their familiarity with the school world.

Thus, Resende, Nogueira & Nogueira (2011, p. 961) have detected clear differences between the parents belonging to different types of schools. The data indicate, according to the authors, “that the families of the ‘regular’ State and municipal schools feature a lower socioeconomic level, and demographic characteristics that the sociological literature indicates to be less favorable to the education of children”. On the other hand, “the families of State and municipal schools, characterized by a better performance, present a situation a little more advantageous; those, whose children attend State schools, have a more favorable profile, among the set of families investigated”.

Depending on the membership to the group of parents, the criteria mobilized to the process of selection, in the moment of choice, also differ. Thus, “the parents of regular State and municipal schools are those who refer, the most, the class schedule and the location – functional criteria, which are not directly associated to the teaching-learning process”. Whereas “the parents of the State and municipal schools, which have a better performance, attach far greater importance to the methods and the quality of teaching, as well as to the recommendation of friends, than those of the first group”. The last group of parents, the parents of State schools “are those who value the most those three criteria” (*idem*, pp. 964-965). The authors conclude that these results show “the relationship between choice of the educational institution and the family profiles, highlighting the social character of that choice”, and draw attention to the importance of the fact that, by not homogenizing parents of low and medium-low layers of the population, it was possible to identify different profiles within that universe (*idem*, p. 966).

In the study of Alegre Canosa & Benito Pérez (2012), these differences and inequalities, when the time comes to choose the school, are identified between groups with unequal positioning within the social structure. Thus, the authors identify four socio-economic profiles of families in a

typological exercise that they develop according to the work of Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe. Specifically, the authors claim, that given the criteria for choice of school and the social rank profile, they identify the following types: *selective* families, *instrumental* families, *expressive* families and *trusting* families.

In short, *selective* families exhibit higher academic qualifications and have a more privileged rank in the social structure, valuing, on one hand, the social composition of the school, and on the other, the academic training it provides. According to the data, it is the group that initiates the search process of the school in advance, and which is in possession of a better knowledge of both the functioning of the process of choice, and of the characteristics of the schools offers. It is, in short, a highly selective group, when the time comes to choose a school for their children, and has a high ability of mobilization during the process, which allows them to identify those options that best fit their preferences, as well as to articulate choice strategies that maximize their children's opportunities to access their desired school profile (*idem*, p. 73).

In the second group of parents, *the instrumental*, parents, although they have a profile of a less privileged academic qualification and social rank, they wish, all the same, to have an active role in the process of choosing the school, and are willing to teach their children out of the area of their residence. Not being families as selective as those of the first group, they also demonstrate concern with the social composition and with the educational dimension, focusing primarily on the quality of the teaching staff (*ibid*).

The third group of families, the families designated as *expressive*, prioritize the proximity of the school and its educational project, neither the social composition of the school, nor the quality of the teaching team being, for them, a priority. Therefore, they reveal a choice pattern less oriented towards maximizing the student's academic performance.

Finally, the fourth group, the so-called *trusting* families, exhibit, in general, low academic qualifications and occupy a less privileged position in the social structure. Relatively to choice, "it is not prioritized, as a criterion of choice, neither the social composition of schools, nor the

educational dimension, seeking, in particular, a school that is close to the family home” (*idem*, p. 74).

From these predispositions, unequal towards the choice of school, the authors conclude: “that which is in question is not, merely, the expression of preference based on horizontal criteria; behind these motivations are unequal goals, anchored in unequal positions, strictly bound, on their turn, to unequal ranks in the social structure” (*idem*, p. 76).

In tune with these results, we ought to remember the work of Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe done in 1995. The authors, from parents' discourses, identified three groups of parents. In brief, in the first group, parents were *privileged-skilled choosers*, being this group composed by liberal professionals, public servants – the middle class. Parents who reveal a propensity to the choice, which holds a central role in their lives. In this process, they seek to conciliate the characteristics of schools, such as the school population, the dimension and the academic orientation, with their children's characteristics. Although, within this group, the authors detect some differences, they conclude, that for the group as a whole, the social composition of the school is a valued element in the decisive moment of choosing the school, even though with subtle distinctions, with parents taking into consideration the advantages their children can get, both social and academic. To these parents, “An identification with the institution and its ‘clients’ is an important component of choice” (Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995, p. 37).

As for the second group, parents presented themselves as *semi-skilled choosers*, and in this group, although parents display an inclination towards choice, they possess less resources than the parents of the first group, and for that reason, they based their decisions in opinions of third parties, who are considered by these parents to be more able to perform that task. However, they show interest and are attentive to information about schools, so that they are able to identify positive and negative characteristics of the schools at stake.

Finally, in the third group of parents, composed by the working class, choice is viewed as *disconnected-choice*, 'as necessity'. This group of parents enroll their children in school, based on their living conditions. Thus, their children attend schools that are near to the families' residence, with easy transportation and locomotion. These factors are central to this group, precisely because parents aspire for a good education in the district school, since they believe that academic scores depend more on their children's efforts, than on other less deterministic factors, such as the school *ethos*. In the light of these results, it appears that only the parents of the first group exercise the choice of school, and that the parents of the latter group do not even exercise it at all.

That being said, we can state that the different studies arrive to the same common conclusion that parents' choice of school is a mechanism of *reproduction of social inequalities*, insofar as the greater or lesser possession of a cultural, social and economic capital turns into inequality in the exercise of school choosing. In other words, the three different studies provide empirical evidence that choosing school requires the possession of these capitals, and that the possibility of choice does not benefit the groups of disadvantaged parents; on the contrary, it makes them even more disadvantaged in the world of school education.

Other similar conclusion, of the three studies, is related to a detailed analysis of the reasons for choice of advantaged social groups. Thus, if it is true, that to this group of parents, the scientific and pedagogic quality of the school is an important reason for choice, the 'social composition of the clients' (cf. Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe, 1995), the 'recommendation of friends' (Resende, Nogueira & Nogueira, 2011) and the 'social composition of the school' (Alegre Canosa & Benedito Pérez, 2012) are reasons mentioned by the advantaged social groups involved in the three studies under analysis in our work, which reveals a strong *selective* character, that we cannot ignore. The data obtained seem to leave no doubt, that under the cloak of choice, it lurks a

trend to a social polarization of schools, which can be amplified by the explicit policies of the choice of public school⁴.

Despite the similarities detected, we noticed, among the three studies, a difference in the categorization of the groups of parents. In one of the most recent studies, a more complex analysis than the one conducted by the study of Gewirts, Ball & Bowe (1995) has been presented. Whereas the latter presents three profiles/groups of parents, based on their socio-economic group, the investigation conducted by Alegre Canosa & Benito Pérez (2012) indicates four groups of parents and strategies in the choice of school, breaking with the traditional classification of groups of disadvantaged classes, medium classes, and privileged classes. In this way, a wider *scale of differences*, sometimes subtle ones, is seized, as parents' choice of school is concerned.

In the light of what we have exposed, we ought to highlight the similarities between the studies we have just analyzed: i) the studies conclude and reinforce that the parents' reasons, propensity, and behaviors, when choosing a school, are closely connected with their status in the social structure; ii) the social composition of the school is considered an important reason by the parents of privileged groups. On the other hand, we have pointed out the differences; one of the recent studies presents a wider basis of parents' profiles/groups, based on their socio-economic groups and on their choice strategies, than the one presented by the study of Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe.

CONCLUSIONS.

In this article, we took as our reference the parents' choice of school, from the perspective of the sociology of critic education, based on the work of Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe, published in 1995. With this frame, we realized a small-scale research on studies that addressed the crossing of parents' choice of school with their social status in the social structure with an empirical component regarding the parents.

⁴ This school polarization/segmentation may be understood as an unequal distribution of students who fall in the same profile (socio-economic, cultural, background) among distinct schools, in the same educational stage. This phenomenon is problematic, because it limits the relationship among classes and among cultures, and the inclusion and social cohesion. But also, and this is not a less important outcome, because the school segregation emphasizes the inequalities of students' academic grades (Alegre Canosa, 2010).

We found two studies and analyzed them, together with the study by Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe. From this exploratory analysis, we registered that these studies reinforce that which we already knew; that is, that families' behaviors are not uniform, when faced with the possibility of choosing their children's school with clear differences according to parents' social status and proximity to the values of the school (cf. Barroso, 2003).

A new datum presented by one of the most recent studies indicates that the basis for the differentiation of the families, taking into account their socio-economic group and confronted with the choice of their children's' school, is wider. This widening allows us to seize a larger *scale of differences* regarding the choice of school; sometimes subtle and until then ignored in universes defined according to a more traditional fashion, relatively to the socio-economic classifications.

Finally, one ought not to ignore, that in these three studies, we realize that one criterion for choice considered as an important one by the privileged social groups is related to the social composition of the school. We reckon that this situation is an accrediting factor to a social polarization among public schools; such polarization may even be amplified in those contexts where public policies of school choice and the construction of an *educational quasi-market* are implemented⁵.

The conclusions and trends made evident in the three studies deserve, in our opinion, a thorough reflexion on the public policies of school choice and on the measures that may invert the inequalities revealed in this domain.

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⁵ In this context of *educational quasi-market*, we also assist to school strategies to attract students, namely promotional and marketing strategies, to attract the best students. The purpose of such activities is to make schools “more visible in the market place” (Van Zanten, 2006, p. 201), giving rise to phenomena of *fabrication of the school image* (cf. Martins, 2009 and Sousa, 2013).

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