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Reacting to poverty: A comparative analysis of schools in Brazilian deprived areas

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Abstract Schools in the most deprived areas in Brazil are marked by extreme poverty, a situation that has obvious consequences for the everyday life in schools and for efforts to develop a supportive culture of schooling. Nevertheless, schools' responses to poverty are far from uniform. Although the context of poverty generally determines what is possible for schools to achieve, this context is by no means consistent. Not all schools located in poor areas offer poor education. And, in themselves, unfavourable contexts do not necessarily generate educational failure. This article captures the diversity of effects generated by poverty at the school level, and the variety of responses by schools situated in very similar socioeconomic and cultural contexts. It draws on a study conducted in the state of Minas Gerais, which explored five schools and their corresponding cultures to reveal the diverse effects of poverty at the school level.

Keywords Poverty · Inequality · School culture · Politics · Inclusion · Brazil

The global agenda for development places great emphasis on education in reducing poverty. Investing in education has become almost a magical remedy that will let individuals, families, and countries improve their living conditions and escape poverty. The priority attributed to education in the fight against poverty is shared by governments in the North

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and South, and by international bodies and non-governmental organisations. No one doubts the benefits of education in either economic or social terms; it contributes to economic growth, fosters productivity, raises levels of welfare and social cohesion, and much more (Preston and Green 2003).

Clearly, education is fundamental for improving the population's living conditions, especially in today's knowledge society, in which investment in education is increasingly necessary to guarantee that the great majority of people are included in society and in the labour market. However, we agree with Colclough (2012), who points out how limited the dominant paradigms in this domain are for capturing and analysing the complex relationships between education, poverty, and development. The results of education depend profoundly on local contexts—social, economic, and cultural—and therefore are "much less direct and more complex than is often believed" (Colclough 2012, p. 144).

We have already argued elsewhere (Bonal and Tarabini 2010) that one of the greatest omissions in descriptions of the hegemonic relationship between education and poverty is the failure to consider the effects that poverty has on education. In this article, we conduct a detailed analysis of one of these effects: that of poverty on schools. We analyse how contexts marked by extreme poverty have repercussions on the working conditions of schools, on their forms of organization, and on their processes and their everyday dynamics—and thus how they generate different opportunities for their pupils. As Lupton (2004) and Tickly (2011) point out, it is essential to recognise the importance of the context if we are to comprehend educational processes and opportunities. Respected authors in the field of school micro-politics have already stated that what happens inside schools cannot be separated from the broader socio-political contexts in which they are located (Ball 1987). So, what schools do, or neglect to do, is not independent from their specific context of action and, in this case, from contexts marked by poverty.

Although we believe that contexts of poverty clearly influence the prospects for schools succeeding, it is also clear that these contexts do not always determine success. Not all schools located in poor areas offer poor education. And in themselves, unfavourable contexts do not always generate educational failure. As Dale (2010) points out, poverty is extremely heterogeneous, so we should take diversity rather than homogeneity as the norm. We agree, having developed and begun using a conceptualization of poverty that goes beyond its economic and material aspects (Bonal and Tarabini 2010). Moreover, schools play an active role in producing educational inequalities, so we cannot ignore their capacity to generate more, or fewer, opportunities for their pupils.

Therefore, our specific objective in this analysis is to capture the diversity of effects generated by poverty on a school level, identifying the variety of responses by schools situated in very similar socioeconomic and cultural contexts. Using Ball's (1987) term, our aim is to study the different "micro-political responses" that the schools generate in relation to contexts of extreme poverty.

Methodology and sample

To study the different ways that schools respond to poverty, we conducted a multiple case study of five schools in Belo Horizonte, the capital of Minas Gerais, Brazil, doing our fieldwork in several phases between 2006 and 2009. Our approach was ethnographic; we interviewed the schools' teachers, pupils, and families, and observed their everyday dynamics and participation in meetings, classroom activities, and other settings in the schools.

The five schools we selected are public. They offer primary–and in some cases secondary—education, and are located either inside *favelas* (shanty towns) or in neighbourhoods that border them. The five schools mainly teach poor pupils, although some reflect a wider mix of social origins. Our sample also includes three municipal schools and two state schools, reflecting Brazil's dual network of public schooling: municipal and state.

This variable is crucially important in Brazil, as the two networks differ significantly in both their ideological/pedagogical orientations and their teachers' employment conditions. The municipal network is governed by an education policy (*Escuela Plural*, or plural schooling), based on the criteria of social equity and inclusion. Among the core emphases of this reform effort are project work, extended time for teachers to coordinate their teaching, mechanisms for individualised attention to pupils, and continuous evaluation. Likewise, these schools have substantially improved the employment conditions of the teachers, who enjoy a high level of stability, relatively high salaries, and various opportunities and mechanisms for coordination, planning, and training (Dalben 2000).

The education policy of the state network, on the other hand, is focused on improving management and quality. In fact, the star programme in the administration of state education, the *Programa ProQualidade* (ProQuality Programme), was implemented thanks to a financial agreement with the World Bank. Among its most prominent reforms are evaluating schools and publishing and comparing results; promoting school autonomy in pedagogical, administrative, and financial terms; promoting principals as managers or school administrators; and providing innovative learning materials that focus on improving educational results. Although the programme was discontinued in 2000, its components were maintained as independent projects. The state secretariat for education is currently developing programs to provide distance training for school managers, to achieve excellence in state schools, and to reduce the levels of violence in schools. In these schools the teachers' employment conditions include frequent rotation, low salaries, and few mechanisms for working together, planning lessons, or attending to pupils outside of regular classes or planning their lessons (Duarte 2004).

The differences between the networks mark the highly unequal conditions for developing educational work in these schools, and also generate different opportunities for guaranteeing that pupils learn. In this regard, one would imagine that simply including both types of schools in the sample would be enough to capture the main differences and responses between schools located in poor or disadvantaged contexts. However, the diversity among these schools does not relate exclusively to the network they are part of. Although the two administrations have implemented very different policies, it is also true that the schools adopted the reforms in different ways. Any attempt to reform the education system suffers from processes of re-contextualization, depending on how the education community interprets the changes, and also on the different conditions of the schools where these reforms are applied (Bernstein 1990). These unwanted effects of education policy can often be foreseen, or at least can be clearly explained in light of the contents of the reforms and the conditions under which they are implemented (Dale 1989).

Therefore, along with the criterion of the school network, we used a second selection criterion to capture how the reforms originating from the educational administration have been re-contextualized. We evaluate how much each reform has been accepted and how successfully it has been applied. Thus, we analyse the various "micro-political responses" to the administration's attempts at education reform. Among the municipal schools we see considerable variation. In one, which we call the Innovative School, the reforms have been fully accepted and successfully applied. Another, which we call the Open

School, accepted the objectives of the reform but did not achieve the expected success. The third, which we call the Resistant School, resisted the changes originating from the municipal administration. Among the two state schools, one (the Managerial School) fully accepted the state administration's reforms and the other (Traditional School) was reluctant to apply the new models for school management. For both of these schools, the employment conditions for the teachers in the state network limited the degree to which they could apply the reforms.

We assigned the labels to each school after our analysis; they combine the schools' responses to poverty with their responses to the proposals for educational reforms at the municipal and state levels. In fact, even though our main objective was to analyze the effects of poverty on schools, observing different schools' reactions to increasingly impoverished students, we believe it is not possible to perform such an analysis outside of the processes through which educational policies were recontextualised.

In the rest of this article, we present a detailed analysis of the five schools, exploring how they react to a context of poverty and pupils who are largely underprivileged. We will refer to several themes, including each school's degree of openness to the community, the cohesion among teachers, the type of pedagogical projects, and the school's *ethos*. In Table 1 we summarise key information on the schools.

The innovative school

We understand an innovative school to be one that recognises how each of its pupils is special and tries, through reflection and collaborative work, to put into practice the best teaching strategies to guarantee that they learn. The innovative school is based on the understanding that traditional school culture, which is already limited in its ability to educate the middle classes, is even more inadequate in dealing with pupils from poor families. Pedagogical innovation is not an academic exercise that is distanced from the school; rather, it is a collective and reflexive practice in which teachers evaluate their own work and put into practice the conclusions they draw. Such a school recognises that it is constantly evolving.

Our innovative school is located in a humble neighbourhood bordered by *favelas*, which are home to some of its pupils. At 1,700 students, it is a large school, offering both primary and secondary schooling and excellent facilities: green spaces, renovated classrooms, computers, etc. The staff room is always open and is located in the middle of the playground. The teachers eat lunch with the students; the school offers a special menu adapted for children who do not get enough to eat at home.

The teachers at the school take on the challenge of being educators, avoiding the "professionalist" ideology that conceives of the teacher as merely a transmitter of knowledge. They have not chosen this; it is the professional profile most appropriate for their situation. They defend the idea that collective work is the best way to make the school more efficient. Group decisions are more important than individual interests, and everyone must accept that such group decisions are also their own. Any lack of commitment, individualistic attitudes, or behaviour that contradicts the school's political and pedagogical project can lead to a teacher being dismissed. The art teacher at this school described her work, and the school's approach:

Table 1 Key facts on the five case-study schools

	Innovative School	Open School	Resistant School	Traditional School	Managerial School
Education network	Municipal	Municipal	Municipal	State	State
Social composition	Mixed poor and working-class neighbourhood, bordering a favela	Extreme poverty, inside a favela	Mixed poor, working-class, and lower middle-class neighbourhood, bordering a favela	Mixed poor and working-class neighbourhood, bordering a favela	Extreme poverty, inside a favela
Openness to the community	Symbolic openness—willing to cater to all pupils—without physical openness, given standardised and regulated timetables	School of the community and for the community. School as a social centre of reference	Physically and symbolically closed to the community	Physically and symbolically closed to the community	Practices of openness to the community with closed physical structure
Level of cohesion between teachers	Collaborative work and collective decisions	Commitment to the school, but difficulties in pursuing collaborative teaching	Corporatism among teachers	Frequent rotation of teachers, lack of stability	Frequent rotation of teachers, lack of stability, emphasis on directives
Pedagogical projects	Many: innovative and unified	Many, socio-educational, but not unified or highly successful	None. Logic of teaching activity is grouping pupils by level.	None. Logic of teaching activity is grouping pupils by level.	Yes, focused on instrumental dimensions of learning. Application failed because teachers were not committed.
Relationship with pupils	Closeness and affection. Proximity as key to success. Combination of instrumental and expressive aspects of learning	Closeness and affection. Proximity as a means for success. Focus on expressive aspects of learning	Reluctance to accept poor pupils as pupils in their full right	Indifference, failure to consider the specific needs of poor pupils	Intention to reduce cultural distance between school and pupils with exclusive focus on instrumental aspects of learning
Focus of pedagogical practices	Pupils	Pupils	Teachers	Teachers	Pupils
Ethos of the school	Meaningful learning	Integrated attention to students	Control, authority, and discipline	Reliance on academic standards	Emphasis on management

What I am trying to do is adapt and work on things of interest to [the pupils]. I may be contributing more to the artistic aspect but there are so many things to do first: work attentively, show understanding, decipher images. It is a totally different culture to [that of the pupils].

At this school there are no physical education teachers. What we have is a kind of playground, because that was one of the demands of the education community. We held an assembly to discuss whether or not we need such a professional. We also discuss how to form teams, how to choose teachers, how they are going to do their work… how we organise ourselves. These assemblies are deliberative. It's very democratic.

Closeness and affection are considered to be indispensable elements for students to learn, especially given the many students at this school who live in poverty. The climate of affection and of internalizing rules is the essential basis for transmitting the curriculum to the pupils. When teachers notice students having trouble learning, and in ways they cannot manage in their highly diverse classrooms, they create temporary small groups that focus teaching resources on those students. As part of a project set up by the municipal administration, such groups of pupils meet full-time for three days a week. Likewise, the teachers demand greater autonomy from the administration, so they can spend more time with the pupils who have more trouble, and to help all of them learn more.

The school has consistently improved its results on the Index of Basic Education Quality (*Indice de Desenvolvimento de Educaçao Basica,* IDEB; see INEP 2014), set up by the Ministry of Education; its scores are now very close to the average among the municipal schools in Belo Horizonte. Meanwhile, its scores are slightly above average among municipal schools in other evaluation systems, such as the Minas Gerais Program for Evaluating the Public Network of Basic Education (*Programa de Avaliação da Rede Pública de Educação Básica,* PROEB). The SIMAVE (2014) website offers more information on these systems.

Clearly, then, the school is focused on attending to the specific needs of its pupils and their families. Its work is constructed for them and with them. Interestingly, however, this school that shows so much concern for innovation and inclusion is somewhat isolated from the community. Unlike others located in underprivileged areas, this school operates on a standard timetable and offers very few activities outside of school hours. In fact, although some schools in these neighbourhoods (such as the Open School) function as social centres within the community, the Innovative School seems reluctant to take on this role. When the municipality proposed that the school be open on weekends, it rejected that possibility, likely because it lacked the necessary human and material resources. We should also note that the school feels pressure from the less disadvantaged families to maintain its high level of teaching. These families live with a certain fear of what they perceive as the school's "excessive openness", which could lead to the loss of the quality teaching that they feel should be the school's priority focus. So, either because it lacks the resources, or needs to maintain a balance between the varying sensitivities of its families, the school is not totally open to the community. Because of this decision, it could fail to take advantage of the community's resources, which could lead some of the neediest students to feel less connected to it.

The open school

An open school is one that seeks to respond to the community's interests by having it participate. In principle, this should not mean that the school has no strategic orientation of

its own, but that the orientation has been decided democratically by the social and educational actors in the neighbourhood. The two greatest obstacles to the emergence of an open school are the "professionalism" of the teachers and the failure of people in the local community to mobilize. An open school is expected to be less culturally distant from its pupils and their families, and to know how to respond to their educational and social needs. These points are especially important for schools working with people in poverty, who have traditionally felt excluded by the curriculum, and have not done well academically. This school is located in an extremely poor favela, but one where the civil society is very well organised. People involved in a neighbourhood movement created the school, using an approach called a participative budget. The school is big, with 1,527 students, and offers pre-primary and primary schooling. It is well maintained and has a gymnasium, video and computer rooms, a meditation room, etc. Members of the community respect the school because they know they developed it, and they should enjoy it. The school is open every day of the year, and many kinds of activities are held there. The assistant headmistress described the school:

> [The families and pupils] conceive of this space as the only pleasant place in the whole neighbourhood. And they therefore have enormous respect for the space. If the school is well preserved it is because the community looks after it. They will not allow anything to happen to it…. This school was a victory by the community itself, and when you win something, even with a certain amount of difficulty, you value it more.

The teachers at the school form a group that has been there since its creation. They are highly committed to the school, but also recognise the difficulties involved in collectively designing collaborative teaching work. They show great empathy to the students and have very close relationships with them, but they sometimes seem not to be strategically oriented toward the school's objectives and the best ways to achieve them. They experience great solidarity with each other, but recognise clearly that they do not share the same ideas about what teaching and learning processes to use. They are very aware that attention to emotion and the care of children are very important, but they do not always manage to move beyond this social approach.

In fact, the school operates many teaching projects to deal with the pupils' multiple difficulties, from both academic and social perspectives, but it does not have one unified project that pulls in all of the school's pedagogical objectives and purposes. This failure to unify its objectives and create a system for them clearly limits its ability to develop homogenous criteria for intervention and teaching activities, and thus makes it harder to control its test results.

The school deals successfully with expressive matters, and serves as a source of social support for the students. Thus, it forms part of what Redondo (2004) calls the "primary care circuit". In other words, it is responsible for meeting its pupils' needs for nutrition, health, and safety. But it faces difficulties in guaranteeing that they are learning effectively. Its scores on the IDEB have improved, but they still lie below the average for schools in the municipal network. On the IDEB's range from from 0 to 10, the students' scores have risen from 3.6 to 4.5 to 5.0 in the years 2007, 2009, and 2011. For comparison, the median scores for the municipal schools in these years were 4.4, 5.3, and 5.6. Its students also score below the median for municipal schools on the Portuguese and math tests in PROEB.

Given the great needs in the community, and its students' lack of good prospects for continuing their education, it is no surprise that some people at the school are reluctant to see it become even more of a social care centre—a place responding to basic social needs.

In the favela, no secondary education is available, and the school faces so many difficulties in its everyday work that it must often simply focus on helping the pupils become literate and offering them as full a school experience as they can. Teachers avoid grouping students into different levels, and they evaluate students in ways that are supportive rather than engage in punitive evaluation; thus they are thoughtful about both the cognitive and attitudinal aspects of learning. Rather than sticking to one standard routine, the school incorporates various activities of a socio-cultural nature that are widely followed and accepted. Nevertheless, as the headmistress puts it, in such conditions of extreme poverty, "sometimes nothing is enough".

In short, then, this is a strong-willed school committed to its surroundings, but not one that can always offer its pupils transformative educational opportunities. Being an open school has given it an important capacity to respond to the demands of its context, and it has shown that being a more inclusive school does not necessarily imply greater problems with discipline. Its challenge, undoubtedly, is to find a way to reconcile the need for care that currently dominates everyday life with the need for the students to learn effectively.

The resistant school

We understand a resistant school to be one with a traditional school culture that is reluctant to accept the everyday realities of the new pupils who now attend the school, or to apply the innovations that the municipal administration is proposing. Such a school experiences pressure and criticism because of the way it functions; this makes it even more closed to any type of reform.

Our resistant school is a small primary school, with 846 students. It is located in a modest neighbourhood near the largest *favela* in its region. Consequently, its student population is a mix, with some working-class and lower middle-class students coming from its immediate neighbourhood, and some extremely poor students coming from the nearby *favelas*. The school is surrounded by an immense wall and the gate is always closed. One evening a few years ago, a conflict between the porter and a pupil ended with the porter being killed. The solution was to close the school to the community. The school's infrastructure is quite good, but much of it is underused. For example, teachers park their cars in a playground, a gymnasium is used exclusively for physical education classes and always locked, and a large porch that seems to be ideal for large events or concerts has not been used for years.

The school was always opposed to the municipal administration's reforms and its resistance to those changes became its collective *ethos*. People at the school often criticize the *Escuela Plural* for eliminating the classical disciplinary mechanisms—such as the possibility of expelling students or holding them back a year—for leaving the school with no tools to "control" students. Moreover, its relatively good scores on the national educational tests are used as a powerful argument against introducing any change. On the IDEB, it scores a bit above the average for municipal schools in Belo Horizonte, and higher than the Open School and the Innovative School on the Portuguese and math tests conducted by PROEB.

Though these data seem positive on the surface, we suggest a bit of caution. As Freitas (2007) notes, one perverse effect of IDEB is that schools become more concerned about raising graduation rates than about substantially improving student learning. Moreover, the IDEB results do not account for the results of the "soft practices of exclusion" that still operate in many schools, possibly also in this one, such as "inviting" some students to stay

home from school on the days when the evaluations are conducted. In addition, the teachers and staff take refuge in their collective spirit; that is, when criticised, they tend to offer their own reasons for their practices, and seek refuge with their own group rather than being open to change.

The school refuses to participate in municipal projects and remains isolated from the community, in an attempt to provide the teachers with as peaceful a working climate as possible.

The pedagogical discourse is focused on the division between educational and social issues. Social issues are seen as impeding educational work, so the more isolated the school is, the better its teachers can do their work. But maintaining this isolation is clearly impossible: the pupils bring their problems from home and their social situations help explain many of their learning difficulties. The school's response has been to denounce families that, from the school's perspective, do not keep their side of their agreement. They expect pupils who are interested and disciplined, but what they get—from an important proportion of the students—is quite the opposite.

When we asked about potential solutions, the teachers at the resistant school offered quite dramatic responses. If the families do not do their part, they said, they have no option but to expel their children from the school or remove them from the custody of their parents. The families are asked to become involved, but when their children are involved in conflicts with teachers and they come to the school to demand explanations, they are denied access to the teachers. The teachers use various approaches to exclude pupils they see as difficult: they may group them by level, transfer them to the evening session, or even call the police. If they do not use other forms of punishment or exclusion, that is only because they are against the law. One teacher told us this:

> I am not saying that it has to be corporal punishment, but you must have some authority. If you have no authority or discipline, just imagine! Society itself cannot function without discipline. Today's schools have lost all that. The teacher's autonomy is under threat. We are being intimidated. And who loses out by this? The institution itself, which is being destroyed, it's crumbling to pieces. These were the changes of the last ten years: the loss of the teacher's authority because of the Statute on Children's Rights.

This school is teacher-centred, not pupil-centred. It does not open on weekends because the staff suspects that doing so would involve more work during the week. Teachers use school hours to take care of personal matters and refuse to cover classes when other teachers are away. They repeatedly complain about the way the administration has abandoned them, but in fact they have considerable funding they have never used, because doing so would involve designing a project on which to spend it. Despite the corporate spirit they display in resisting change, they do not engage in any collective work. This refusal makes them stronger as a group, because they need not question their approaches or pedagogical practices, and colleagues do not control each other. At meetings, the group's decisions are binding only for those who vote in their favour. In other words, the majority can prevent a group from performing an activity, but once that activity has been approved, those who opposed it will not be required to participate in it. At these meetings, the teachers' union representatives are always welcome as the union deals not only with teaching issues, but also with labour ones. The teachers display an acute pedagogic anti-intellectualism: "nobody can tell me how to do my job". However, they avidly respond to any offers of postgraduate refresher courses because of the salary incentives the municipality offers.

The teachers at the school are obliged to deal with a type of pupil whom they do not see as complying with the minimum requirements for proper schooling. And they must deal with families who never respond as the teachers believe they should. In addition, they must deal with the education administration: instead of taking their side, it continually questions their methods. They feel vulnerable and undervalued, and have reacted by acting defensively in relation to their surroundings.

The traditional school

We define the traditional school as one that seeks to remain indifferent to changes in the demographics of its student body and to educational reform movements. The school's institutional inertia leads it to keep applying the same solutions to different problems. Not only does this imbalance between the school as an institution and the social structure around it make the teaching and learning less efficient; in addition, the new social context in which it must operate seriously limits its options for putting its own teaching strategy into practice.

This is a primary school, of 900 students, in an integrated working-class district that has deteriorated. It is now surrounded by *favelas*, some of them scenes of quite severe violence. Socially, the student body is quite heterogeneous. At one time, families living near the school tended to send their children to private school, but given the recent economic downturn, they now send them to public schools. Another large proportion of the pupils come from the neighbouring *favelas*, and bring with them their personal experiences of poverty and marginality.

In its social and education policy, the administration is not indifferent to the phenomenon of bringing the most underprivileged pupils into the schools, but it has few projects that might alleviate the possible problems. It could be said that this school has been very unfortunate in the way the administration has distributed resources. The council considered the neighbouring *favelas* to be so violent that it could not consider the school for its programme that targets poor districts. Meanwhile, the state did not consider the neighbourhood around the school to be marginal enough to benefit from its programme, *Escola Viva, Comunidade Ativa,* that targets resources to certain schools in Minas Gerais, as an incentive for them to create links with the community.

As a result of the administration's selective actions, and the inadequate financing from the state network, this school has trouble maintaining its infrastructure, and lacks the support personnel to respond to the pupils' social needs. And its problems with overcrowding keep it from being able to plan alternative educational activities outside the classroom.

The school operates with its back turned to the new social reality around it. The new management decided to terminate the programmes that brought the school closer to the community. Former pupils no longer collaborate with the school, and parents cannot use the facilities on the weekend. The teachers argued that it was more important to maintain their control over the school space than to explore the possibilities of opening up to the community. The wall around the school seems to be growing taller by the day, and the families are outside. The school has decided to close itself off from participation.

These decisions are not difficult to understand if we consider the profile of the school's teachers. Most of them are temporary, and also work at other schools. This frequent rotation of personnel keeps them from committing to the work at this school. And the fact that they are paid only for the hours they spend in the classroom provides them no

incentive to consider their teaching practice, or to plan for collaborative work. Understandably, temporary teachers have no interest in continuing at a school whose students live in poverty and face many problems, both affective and material. Teachers are frequently absent throughout the year, and the school responds by sending the children home because it has neither the commitment nor the means to deal with such difficulties—which are entirely predictable. Not surprisingly, the school's scores on the IDEB are far below the median for state schools, and have not improved much over the years. For 2007, 2009 and 2011, they were 4.3, 4.2, and 4.7, compared to the median of 5.1, 5.9, and 5.9.

The learning problems of children who live in poverty are a burden that the school is not willing to assume. The school blames the families for not instilling in their children good habits that will facilitate teaching, and it expels undisciplined pupils with learning problems. Rather than deal with the challenge of such diversity in the classroom, it divides pupils into groups based on their behaviour and performance, which only stigmatizes those who are already underprivileged. This policy, which clearly benefits those with fewer social problems, serves the interests of the more experienced teachers; they end up working with the less troublesome pupils and leave the more difficult ones for the young and temporary staff to deal with. The headmistress described the policy on grouping:

> We try to make three groups of a more or less homogenous level to help the teacher to choose the right level to guide each group.… In the classes that get the lowest exam scores, they are all poor pupils, because it wouldn't be fair for those who get the best exam results to be put in bad classes.

We were surprised to discover that these pedagogical practices are not echoed in the state education administration. When state inspectors come to the school, rather than helping the school find alternatives to excluding underprivileged pupils, they focus on evaluating how well the teacher complies with the official curriculum, thus reinforcing the school's *ethos*. This all seems to suggest that the former ideal of state schools with a strong academic orientation is surviving at the expense of the interests of teachers in precarious positions and of pupils living in poverty.

The managerial school

The managerial school resulted when management models from the private sector were incorporated into public schools. Among the key elements of this model are strong leadership by the school management, an emphasis on using resources efficiently, and a de-emphasis on teaching methods. The idea is to apply a method originating elsewhere in order to make schools more effective. It assumes that the problems with state schools stem from squandering funds, over-accommodating teachers, and allowing teachers to engage in excessive theoretical reflections to the detriment of directly improving results. In situations of extreme poverty, like the one surrounding this school, we must question whether the remedy can remain independent from the social context in which it is applied.

This is a relatively small school: 965 students including primary and secondary. A large proportion of the students live in poverty, as it is located at the heart of an extremely violent *favela*. The administration imposed the headmistress because no one at the school wanted to take on that responsibility. As at many state schools, the teachers are temporary and must also work at other schools to earn a decent salary. Work at this school is very far from the ideal job that most teachers dream of, so most of them view their time there as a transitional period before they can find something better.

The school is a small fortress in the midst of a *favela*. Through the initiative of the headmistress, it maintains stable cooperative relationships with the local churches and social service and charity organisations. Through these relationships, it can mobilize resources to offer extracurricular activities to its pupils. The state administration focuses resources on this work and offers various projects to accompany the regular school offerings. The school stays open on the weekends, has full-time pupils, has support staff to teach mathematics and Portuguese, and also offers cultural and artistic activities.

The staff is clearly trying to make the school effective, and the state administration is providing resources to that end. But the teachers are resistant and the families are not involved, so these projects have not developed as their designers had hoped. The teachers do not feel committed to these initiatives, either because of their training or because they did not participate in planning for them. The headmistress is constantly bringing new proposals to the faculty for them to approve, which would formally oblige everyone to participate. But the reality is that the teachers are simply looking to get through the school day with as little effort as possible and without confronting the management. The families, meanwhile, sense that the management often calls on them to participate in activities that have already been defined and that they often do not fully understand. A math teacher at the school explained:

> What happens here is that… well, sometimes we do not agree with the principal's proposals. It is true that she has done good things for the school, but I do not fully agree with all her proposals, and I am not the only one. In a school like this, discipline has to be a basic criterion if you want to achieve something. I do not believe in active pedagogy. This is the truth. And lots of us teachers are thinking like that.

The school places a major emphasis on the instrumental dimension of education; for example, each term it holds exams that seek to simulate university entrance exams. The idea is to bridge the cultural divide between the school and the pupils, making them familiar with the official culture of the education system without questioning the curriculum and pedagogy. This emphasis on evaluation clashes with the reality of the school itself, in which pupils have to go home when their teachers are absent so that they will not interrupt the routine of the other classes. Attempts are made to impose discipline but doing so takes up much of the time and effort that should be dedicated to teaching. And not surprisingly, the students get low and inconsistent scores on the standardised tests. In fact, on the IDEB, its current results are worse than in 2005. Its results on the IDEB were 3.8 in 2005, 3.8 in 2007, 4.3 in 2009, and 3.4 in 2011.

Clearly, this school has implemented projects that have gotten around the immobility of the traditional school and have sought new ways to improve state schools. Their application has failed both because of the lack of dialogue and the teachers' employment conditions—along with the general disdain for the more interactive and caring aspects of the teaching and learning process. Whatever the reasons, it does not seem possible to remedy a school's problems by imposing a system of incentives and punishments, especially when they are not in keeping with the families' everyday realities, the teachers' knowledge, and the community's sense of participation—and still expect improved results.

Conclusions

Our analysis of these five schools has led us to four general conclusions. First, any educational work must first consider the context in order to understand the educational processes and opportunities that the different schools generate. The fact that these schools are

located in underprivileged areas and their student bodies are largely living in poverty creates specific limits on their possibilities, limits that cannot be ignored either in academic analyses or in political recommendations. We therefore fully agree with Lupton (2004), who states that improvements to schools in disadvantaged contexts cannot be achieved by generic means, but only through policies that are specifically designed to respond to the particular needs of the specific areas and schools.

At this point, it seems crucial to reflect on the standardized assessment tests. We think it is essential to evaluate the performance of schools and we recognize that standardized tests can provide useful information. We believe, however, that the failure to analyse these data in their context can lead to highly inaccurate conclusions and recommendations. In fact, although context is always important at a discursive level it can be neglected in practical analyses and political recommendations. A clear example of this is the highly decontextualized uses of standardized test results. In this sense, it is crucial to consider some questions. What effects do the socioeconomic backgrounds of students have on standardized results? How does testing change the schools' teaching practices? Do schools engage in practices that are less than admirable in order to improve their overall test scores? Of course the answers to these questions lie beyond the scope of this article but in themselves the questions reveal the importance of contextual factors.

Second, although the context of poverty places conditions on what schools can do, and constricts their everyday practices, one cannot speak of a mechanical or linear relationship. In other words, poverty conditions but does not determine the options for developing schools. In fact, the five schools we studied all reacted differently to similar conditions of poverty. What causes this diversity is the combination of the context of poverty and two other key variables: the legal and institutional framework of education policy, and the existing professional culture at each school. Education policy includes such important questions as curricular, organizational, and evaluative frameworks. Likewise, it offers crucial information on teachers' working conditions. Meanwhile, the school's professional culture enables us to identify crucial differences between schools in the ways that teachers work together, the educational expectations, and the relationships between teachers and pupils (Hargreaves 1994). Undoubtedly, these are central issues for understanding how the school reacts to a context marked by poverty. Following Ainscow (1996), we could say that the possibility of implementing inclusive education practices is closely linked to the existence of cultural differences between schools. In this sense, as we suggested at the beginning, responses to poverty are not at all independent of responses to educational reforms. That is, the schools that are best able to respond to poverty in inclusive ways are those that are more open to reviewing and modifying their pedagogical practices, more connected with local realities, and more committed to the educational development of all their students.

Third, and clearly associated with the point above, teachers play a central role in the way the school reacts to the context of poverty and the educational opportunities it generates. If teachers can build bridges with the least fortunate pupils, can make them feel that the school is their place, and can offer them various resources and learning methods, they can broaden their opportunities to succeed, despite the extreme difficulty of their everyday lives. Teachers are not neutral parties in dealing with inequality and in providing educational opportunities for their students. In this sense, it is crucial to explore how pupils' social origins influence teachers' expectations, beliefs, and practices. Of course, this is hardly a new area of study. More than 40 years ago, Rist (1970) had already demonstrated the central role that teacher expectations play in explaining students' opportunities to succeed or fail at school. This point is still highly relevant. In fact, Dunne and Gazeley

(2008) suggest the need for more systematic attention to the micro-social processes that provide the conditions that lead working-class students to underachieve.

Finally, although teachers are key agents of educational success, not all of the responsibility should be placed on them. Structural responses are also needed, to get to the root of the multiple difficulties concentrated in schools like these five. Schools and teachers are active agents in producing opportunities for their pupils, but working alone they cannot transform a reality that is marked by structural poverty. As Lipman (2004, p. 182) put it, "although much can be done by committed educators, the state of education cannot be separated from the reality of life in deeply impoverished neighbourhoods". No answers to the problems of social exclusion, poverty, and education will succeed if they ignore the need for material redistribution and cultural recognition (Lynch and Baker 2005).

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