

ARTICLE

**MIDDLE-CLASS FAMILIES IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS: FROM CHOICE TO PARTICIPATION STRATEGIES.**

**MARIA ALICE NOGUEIRA<sup>1</sup>**

ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9664-8335>

<[malicen@terra.com.br](mailto:malicen@terra.com.br)>

**TÂNIA DE FREITAS RESENDE<sup>1</sup>**

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4275-7426>

<[taniaresbr@gmail.com](mailto:taniaresbr@gmail.com)>

**PRISCILA DE OLIVEIRA COUTINHO<sup>1</sup>**

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7178-2789>

<[prioliveiracoutinho@gmail.com](mailto:prioliveiracoutinho@gmail.com)>

<sup>1</sup>Universidade federal de Minas Gerais Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais (MG), Brazil.

**ABSTRACT:** This article focuses on an atypical reality in Brazil, little explored in the educational debate: the experience of middle-class families with children in public schools. It is grounded on the sociology of family-school relationship, more specifically, in the studies about middle-classes schooling. We collected the empirical data at a public municipal school in the city of Belo Horizonte, Brazil, which, due to its reputation, attracts a significant number of middle-class families. We developed participant observations of the meetings held by the *Family Commission*, created by a group of mothers, and conducted interviews with some of them. Reinforcing international and national studies on the theme, the results show that having children in public schools stresses and tenses these parents. They seek to manage the situation by a rigorous school choice and a series of strategies aiming to minimize the risks of this option and ensure the education desired for their children.

**Key words:** middle classes; public school; family educational strategies.

**FAMÍLIAS DE CLASSES MÉDIAS NA ESCOLA PÚBLICA: DA ESCOLHA ÀS ESTRATÉGIAS DE PARTICIPAÇÃO<sup>1</sup>**

**RESUMO:** O artigo focaliza uma realidade atípica no Brasil e pouco contemplada no debate educacional do país: a experiência de famílias de camadas médias com filhos em escolas públicas. Insere-se no campo

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da sociologia das relações família-escola, mais especificamente, dos estudos sobre escolarização nas camadas médias. Os dados empíricos foram obtidos em uma escola pública municipal de Belo Horizonte que, por sua reputação, atrai um número significativo de famílias de camadas médias. Foram realizadas observações participantes de reuniões da *Comissão de Famílias*, criada por iniciativa de um grupo de mães, além de entrevistas com mães que integravam a Comissão. Reforçando estudos internacionais e nacionais sobre o tema, os resultados evidenciam que ter os filhos na escola pública gera ansiedade e tensão para essas famílias. Elas buscam administrar a situação por meio da escolha criteriosa do estabelecimento de ensino e do desenvolvimento de um conjunto de estratégias que visam minimizar os riscos dessa opção e assegurar a formação desejada para a prole.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: “classes médias”; “escola pública”; “estratégias educativas familiares”.

**Palavras-chave:** classes médias, escola pública, estratégias educativas familiares.

## FAMILIAS DE CLASES MEDIAS EN LA ESCUELA PÚBLICA: DE LA ELECCIÓN A LAS ESTRATEGIAS DE PARTICIPACIÓN

**RESUMEN:** El artículo enfoca una realidad atípica y poco contemplada en el debate educacional de Brasil: la experiencia de familias de estratos medios con hijos en escuelas públicas. Se insiere en el campo de la sociología de las relaciones familia-escuela, aunque más específicamente de los estudios sobre la escolarización en los estratos medios. Los datos empíricos se obtuvieron en una escuela pública municipal de Belo Horizonte que por su reputación atrae un número significativo de familias de clases medias. Fueron realizadas observaciones participantes de reuniones del *Comité de Familias*, creado por iniciativa de un grupo de madres de familia de la institución, así también, se realizaron entrevistas a las madres que integraban dicho Comité. Reforzando estudios internacionales y nacionales sobre la tematica, los resultados evidencian que tener hijos en escuelas públicas genera ansiedad y tensión por parte de los padres de familia. Ellos buscan manejar la situación por medio de la elección criteriosa del establecimiento educativo y del desarrollo de un conjunto de estrategias que se orientan a minimizar los riesgos de su elección para asegurar la formación deseada de sus hijos

**Palabras clave:** clases medias, escuela pública, estrategias educativas familiares.

## FAMILY-SCHOOL RELATIONSHIP AND THE CHOICE OF EDUCATIONAL ESTABLISHMENT IN MIDDLE CLASSES

This article focuses on a reality little considered in the Brazilian educational debate: the experience of middle-class families who enroll their children in public educational establishments. In this sense, the text is part of the tradition of studies in the Sociology of Education regarding the family-school relationship. More specifically, it deals with the forms in which this relationship takes place within the middle classes, emphasizing a particular aspect that, in recent decades, has been drawing researchers' attention: the choice of educational establishment for children.

As a result of an evolution in its theoretical paradigms and methodological guidelines, since the 1980s the Sociology of Education has seen the flourishing of a whole set of empirical research aimed at understanding, in-depth, the relationships that families from different social environments maintain with their schools and the school life of the children (Nogueira, 2005). the observation that the processes of interaction between parents and teaching professionals have been one of the main results obtained and at the same time intensifying, individualizing, and reconfiguring themselves.

In the contemporary period, we are witnessing a strong rapprochement between the world of home and the world of school, so the presence of families in the school space and their involvement in the activities of the teaching-learning process intensify. Parental participation is now required in schools' pedagogical projects and multiple events, such as family parties, science fairs, lectures, courses,

etc. There is also a greater individualization of relationships, that is, a multiplication of face-to-face interactions between these two instances of socialization.

Although these processes generally affect all social classes, they find their most complete form within the middle classes or middle layers<sup>2</sup>, understood here as groups with an intermediate position on the social scale - that is, those that do not occupy “neither the economically and hierarchically dominant positions of the upper classes nor the dominated execution positions of the popular classes” (Cardoso and Prêteceille, 2017, p. 1007-1008). Thus, these are groups that are, in a way, always balancing between the possibility of moving up and the risk of falling down the social scale, tending to make strong investments to maintain or improve their position with the school usually occupying a central place in these investments.

Being a very internally stratified social environment, the middle classes (the plural is necessary) are made up of fractions that are structured according to their material possessions, insertion in the productive world, and level of education. The greater the relative weight of cultural capital in the structure of their assets, the greater their propensity to invest – both materially and culturally – in their children's education (cf. Nogueira, 1997).

Empirical evidence demonstrates that, if school currently tends to be valued in different social environments, the dependence in the middle classes for social reproduction/promotion is most strongly found. In the contemporary context, in which competition between students for the most noble sectors of education systems is exacerbated, families from the middle classes multiply, intensify, diversify, and sophisticate their educational strategies aiming to offer their offspring the best opportunities for academic success (Nogueira, 2013a).

Although there are variations according to class fractions, such strategies generally include strong monitoring of the children's school life, both through constant monitoring and support at home, and through systematic communication and presence at school (Nogueira, 1995; Fialho, 2012; Silva, 2003). Currently, these families also increasingly tend to invest in a wide range of support outside of school (private classes, tutoring, psycho-pedagogical and psychological support), aimed at success in school or the cognitive and social development of their children, more generally (Glasman, 2011; Martins, 2019). According to Lareau (2003), they even promote a true “orchestrated cultivation” of their children's skills, by filling their time outside of school with activities and interactions systematically aimed at their training in different areas.

The strategy that this text most focuses on is choosing a school for the children, whose importance has been increasing with the greater internal diversification of the education system. Middle-layer families, in general, have a wealth of information about the school system that gives them the ability to make an active choice between different types of establishments. Sociological literature has documented families' diverse strategies in this process.

Research carried out in France and England demonstrates that choosing private or even international schools is one of these strategies, although less frequent. Enrollment in public schools is quite common. In the Brazilian case, studies have shown a strong avoidance of public schools by middle-class families. The most favored segments of these classes choose more freely, in the private school market, those that meet their priorities, generally around criteria such as quality of teaching, internationalization, general training, and meeting the subjective needs of their children (Nogueira, 1998; 2000; Brandão; Lellis, 2003; Nogueira; Aguiar, 2007). The sectors closest to the popular classes, in general having experienced upward mobility from them, but still being located in a very unstable position from a socioeconomic point of view, fluctuate, depending on their financial situation at each moment, between low-cost private schools and public schools, which, however, they systematically try to avoid (Siqueira; Nogueira, M. and Nogueira, M.A, 2017; Nogueira, 2013b; Piotto, 2006).

This text aims to contribute to the understanding of both the reasons that lead members of the middle classes to enroll their children in public schools, and how this choice is experienced and sustained. To this end, data obtained in a survey on family-school relationships in the municipal public network of Belo Horizonte/MG will be discussed, which highlighted the experience of some middle-

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<sup>2</sup> In this article, the expressions “middle classes” and “middle layers” will be used equivalently, only to relieve the text of repetitions, and there is no need for a more in-depth discussion regarding the concept of social classes.

class families who send their children to one of the educational establishments in this network. Before presenting the main results of the investigation, the next topic of the article summarizes some points from the literature mobilized, in addition to succinctly exposing the empirical context and the data collection procedures developed.

## STUDIES ON MIDDLE CLASSES IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

As pointed out, the presence of middle classes in Brazilian public schools is relatively minority and little focused on in research. In approaching this topic, the work of Piotto (2002; 2006) stands out. The author completed research in 2002, in a public school in Ribeirão Preto/SP (fictitiously called “Escola Guimarães Rosa”), which, offering only the initial years of elementary education, was distinguished by receiving many students from the middle classes, with most of them coming from private schools. The work sought to understand the repercussions of the greater presence of middle classes in public schools “on social relations, more specifically on coexistence between middle and popular classes” (Piotto, 2006, p. 38). To this end, an ethnographic study was carried out at the school, involving observations, interviews with families and school professionals, application of a questionnaire to families, and documentary research.

The results obtained from families who had migrated with their children from the private network to the public school indicated that their finances were the main reason for the transfer. However, once they started to seek a public institution for this reason, the parents took great care to ensure their children an institution that offered what they considered a minimum standard of quality, which was, for them, a *sine qua non* condition of change. To do this, they carried out an active search for information: they took into account the target audience and the location of the school (in a middle-class neighborhood, in the central region of the city); and the fact that it was a school that only offered elementary education – Cycle 1, where the children would only live with younger children, as they attributed a greater risk of “violence” to contact with teenagers.

Despite these careful choices, the experience at the Guimarães Rosa school was evaluated by most of these families as negative. There were several complaints regarding the school, especially the personal training of the children (the academic training being considered like a private school). The situation was seen as temporary, and, for some, it was certain that in Cycle II of elementary school, their children should return to the private network. Meanwhile, parents developed strategies to bring the institution closer to what they expected. Especially, they began to participate in the Parent-Teacher Association and the School Council, in which they sought, in addition to monitoring more “from within” what was happening at school, to present “practical and quick solutions to the problems faced” (Piotto, 2006, p. 49). Such solutions, however, often could not be implemented due to the operating rules of the public system or even certain management positions – which generated conflicts and frustrations, leading, over time, to a reduction in this participation in management bodies.

Nogueira, M. and Nogueira, M.A (2017) is another relevant national work to be highlighted. As part of research into the educational practices of “parent-teachers”, the authors focus on seven cases of families who educated their children in public schools. Belonging to the middle classes – in this case, in its lowest fractions – is shaped by variables such as education, income, and type of housing. Enrolling their children in a public school does not constitute, for these families, a choice in the full sense of the term, imposed as a necessity due to financial conditions and, in this way, coming closer, according to the authors, to a “no choice”, in Bourdieu’s terms (2008). This is a process experienced with tension and anguish by fathers and mothers, who would like to provide their offspring with access to the same educational possibilities that they see in other segments of the middle classes – including enrollment in private schools. If this is impossible, families develop strategies to minimize the disadvantages they consider existing for their children. The first of them, as in the study by Piotto (2006), is the careful choice of the establishment, among those possible within the public network. From enrollment onwards, intense monitoring, surveillance, and control strategies are observed, including direct intervention measures at school.

On the international scene, a set of studies has been dedicated to observing the conduct of families belonging to the middle classes regarding their children's education (Ball, 2003; Power et al.,

2003; Van Zanten, 2003, 2006). In England, a survey addressed middle-class families who, despite being able to afford educational options outside the state system, deliberately chose - and, as they declared, due to their political ideals and educational principles - to enroll their children in local public schools (“local inner-city comprehensive schools”), whose clientele is made up of students from different social backgrounds and ethnic-racial backgrounds, being avoided by a large part of the middle classes (Crozier et. al., 2008; Reay et al., 2007).

This is a broad survey that questioned 125 white, middle-class families from three cities in the United Kingdom: London, Norton, and Riverton. Parents and 67 young people from the three cities were interviewed. Most parents are highly educated professionals and have high cultural capital. All are committed to the principles of the welfare state and are defenders of public services in areas such as education and health. In this sense, researchers wonder whether choosing a local school would express an engaged citizenship, committed to valuing public schools, especially comprehensive schools<sup>3</sup>.

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The results obtained showed that this choice can be better understood in the register of what they called “self-interested altruism” (Reay et al. 2007, p.1044), as these parents hope to obtain individual advantages for the education of their children such as (i) acquisition of multicultural capital necessary for life in the complex and globalized world of the 21st century; (si) formation of social skills arising from coexistence with people of different ethnic and social origins; (III) constitution of a resilient spirit and prepared for the difficulties of the “real world”.

But perhaps the main finding of the research consists of the web of moral ambiguity in which these parents find themselves involved, which is accompanied by a subjective load of dilemmas, anxiety, and conflicts. They are particularly affected by a tension between, on the one hand, being consistent with their principles and, on the other, caring for the well-being and future of their children. Their anxiety comes mainly from the uncertainties and risks they consider taking when associating their children with children and young people “not like us”, although they always make sure that there are other students “like us” at the chosen school, which they define as children raised in “proactively supportive” homes. However, in terms of academic performance, these parents are quite confident about their children's intellectual capacity, as well as their skills as parents of students, based on their educational knowledge and their various capitals (cultural, social, and economic).

Thus, working to reduce risks and guarantee their children a diverse academic experience within comprehensive schools, these families develop a series of strategies that aim to ensure that their offspring receive the education considered desirable. Among these strategies, the following stand out: careful monitoring of children's school life (e.g. supervision of homework, conversations about daily school life, etc.); hiring extracurricular activities related to areas not covered by the school curriculum (e.g. music, arts; purchase of additional educational materials, such as books, computers); participation in school management, which provides privileged information about the institution and makes it possible to make parents' voices count.

Also in France, research has been carried out on the educational choices and strategies of middle-class families, especially about the social composition of the public that attends the educational institutions they choose for their children. Between 1999 and 2006, Agnès Van-Zanten (2003; 2006;

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<sup>3</sup> In the English education system, comprehensive schools are a type of “secondary” public school (students aged 12 and over) disseminated since the 1970s with the aim of democratizing education. Until then, English secondary education was divided into three branches, to which students were assigned according to their performance in exams at the end of primary school. Currently, most of secondary students attend comprehensive schools, whose curriculum combines elements from the three former branches, and which do not practice admission selection, and are therefore considered “comprehensive”. The text by Crozier et alii (2008) indicates that, among the comprehensive schools, some middle-class families make choices for those that are better positioned in the evaluation rankings, while others choose to keep their children in the local comprehensive school, whose audience tends to be more diverse. The latter are the focus of this article.

2007; 2009a; 2009b) conducted research in four regions on the outskirts of Paris, in which she interviewed 167 families (fathers and mothers) with at least one child studying Elementary Education and belonging to different fractions of the middle classes (higher-level intellectual professions; secondary-level professionals; and non-manual menial professions). The study aimed to examine “the mental operations and practices that lead middle-class parents to construct certain social groups as 'different from themselves'” (Van Zanten, 2009b, p. 25) and to make this the main reason to avoid certain public educational establishments due to their socially heterogeneous clientele; as well as, conversely, building other groups as “close to them”, making them function as a social resource through assessments, information, possibilities for action, at the service of the children's school life.

The results obtained revealed the existence of two main types of families, according to their conception of social life and, within it, the role of the school. On the one hand, parents belonging to the fractions of the middle classes most equipped with economic capital (technocrats, private sector professionals) more frequently express the desire for a school (often private) that ensures an environment where their children live with equals (*entre soi*) with whom they can interact. On the other hand, parents belonging to the fractions of the middle classes most equipped with cultural capital (intellectual professions, public sector staff) are, in general, defenders of a public school space where there is a controlled mix of students from different social backgrounds and not a total separation of others different from themselves (*différents de soi*), which, for them, would favor the development of interactions and traits necessary for a multicultural society, such as open-mindedness, tolerance, solidarity.

However, those families that - whether due to political principles or necessity - accept sending their children to school in public establishments with a socially heterogeneous clientele develop multiple strategies to face any risks arising from their choice. Among these strategies, close monitoring of children's school life and permanent surveillance of the functioning of the educational establishment stand out. Another strategy that stands out is the development of collective actions - through parents' associations, administrative councils, etc. - aiming to mitigate the effects of coexistence with others different from oneself. In the French case, a typical form of this strategy consists of pressure for the creation of “enclaves” within the school, i.e., pedagogical devices such as selected classes aimed at good students, bilingual classes, or classes with an emphasis on the noblest subjects in the curriculum, etc., designed to guarantee exclusivity for a limited number of students. The author calls this type of parental behavior practice “colonization” of the educational establishment by families (Van Zanten, 2006; 2007; 2009a).

## **EMPIRICAL CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH AND DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES**

The empirical data to be discussed in this text were obtained in research carried out in a municipal public school in Belo Horizonte, which will be called “Escola Municipal Olavo Bilac” (or EMOB<sup>4</sup>). The institution serves approximately 1150 students, around 820 of whom are in primary education (SMED-BH, 2018)<sup>5</sup>.

The Olavo Bilac School stands out, within the municipal network, for its prestige and the characteristics of the public it serves. It is in an area with wide streets, abundant trees, and high-end houses, built on large lots. Although, in general, families living in this area are not users of EMOB, but rather private institutions, the institution attracts a significant number of middle-class families from other parts of the neighborhood and other neighborhoods in the city. According to the vice-principal of the institution, the only children in the area who study at the school are “the children of the employees, the caretakers”, who constitute “a minority” among the students. In addition to them, there are, still in the words of the educator, “those students who come from the villages, from the favelas” to others from “more favored communities” “economically, socially, and culturally”, some of whom have graduated

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<sup>4</sup> In this article, all names of institutions and participants are fictitious.

<sup>5</sup> This empirical context is part of a broader investigation into the family-school relationship in public schools, developed in two institutions - EMOB and Escola Municipal Cecília Meireles (EMCM) - between 2017 and 2019. The research was approved by the Committee of Research Ethics on 03/26/2018, with registration CAAE 82752417.4.0000.5149.

from private schools. For this professional, simply “taking a look at recess” is enough to see the heterogeneous composition of the school’s audience.

In the interviews, different school professionals, when characterizing the public served by Olavo Bilac, frequently used the word “heterogeneous” or related words: “varied”, “diversity”, “diversified”, and “eclectic”. There were also frequent mentions of the presence of middle-class families, which are identified either by external attributes (such as the cars in which the parents pick up the children or their appearance) or by coming from private schools, with transfers increasing over periods of economic crisis.

The characterizations made by school professionals were supported by the objective data that was possible to gather about the institution, which indicates that it receives a relatively favored audience, considering the general context of the municipal education network in Belo Horizonte. For example, according to a publication by the Municipal Department of Education (SMED-BH, 2018), which brings together indicators from the fourteen municipal elementary schools that make up the Administrative Region in which Olavo Bilac is located, this is the third one that has the least students whose families receive *Bolsa Família* (only 12.9% of students); is the fourth with the best school climate index and is among those with the highest IDEB, especially for the initial years of elementary school (IDEB 6.4 for the initial years and 5.5 for the final years of elementary school, in 2019).

As this profile of the school was clear from the beginning of the field research, one fact later drew special attention. It was the creation, in 2018, on the initiative of a group of seven mothers and one father, of the self-titled “Family Commission”, conceived as a direct channel of access to the school management, through which these families expected able to monitor and intervene in different dimensions of the institution’s work, with the objective – in the words of one of the mothers – of “making the school better”. The group constituted invited the school principal and teachers to participate in periodic meetings to discuss day-to-day issues at the institution. The teachers did not respond to the invitation, but the principal held three meetings with the Commission, always on Friday nights.

Seeing this initiative as a good opportunity to investigate the challenges of partnership between families and schools, the research team carried out participant observations at meetings and interviews with three mothers who were part of the Commission (Ana, Renata, and Olívia)<sup>6</sup>. The meetings and interviews inspired a deeper analysis of the choice of public education establishment by middle-class families and the type of relationship with the school that developed from then on.

In general, the families that made up the Commission were nuclear, with one to two children, in which fathers and mothers are professionals with higher education (courses such as Computer Science, Architecture, Anthropology, Engineering). However, this education was not necessarily converted into higher profitability occupations (for example, the architect Renata is a municipal civil servant, with a mid-level technical position). Furthermore, several families were experiencing financial constraints, whether due to unemployment (in the case of Olivia's husband) or difficulties in the business sector (for example, Renata's husband, who has a company in the construction and renovation sector, which, however, had been suffering the impacts of the economic crisis since 2014).

Specifically, about the three mothers interviewed, considering that several excerpts from their statements will be reproduced below, some data may be important for a general characterization. Ana is an architect and has a single 10-year-old daughter, who is in her 5th year at Escola Municipal Olavo Bilac (EMOB). Renata has a degree in architecture, but works as a municipal civil servant, in a mid-level position; her husband is a civil engineer and has a construction and renovation company. They have an only daughter, 10 years old, who is in her 5th year at EMOB. Poliana has a degree in Computer Science and works as a systems analyst. The husband completed high school and is unemployed at the time of the research. They have three daughters, aged 12, 10, and 4; the two oldest are enrolled at Escola Municipal Olavo Bilac (EMOB), in the 7th and 5th years, respectively. The youngest is in a public early childhood education school. It is worth mentioning that Ana and Renata's daughters were classmates at

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<sup>6</sup> An attempt was made to conduct interviews with other members of the Commission, but they were not accepted – except for one father, whose interview will not be discussed in this text because he does not fit the profile of middle-class families discussed here. Likewise, in the other eight interviews carried out with EMOB families, the profile was from the lower classes.

a private school and were transferred to EMOB together, as will be reported in the next topic. Olivia's daughters always studied in public schools.

In the following sections, we will analyze - in dialogue with the literature already summarized - the reasons for these families choosing a public school, in this case, Olavo Bilac, some of their experiences at the institution, and the strategies mobilized to monitor the most varied dimensions of everyday school life, including security, adequacy of the physical structure and pedagogical choices.

## CHOOSING PUBLIC SCHOOLS: MOTIVATIONS AND STRATEGIES

The first question to be elucidated concerns the reasons that motivated an unlikely choice in the Brazilian scenario. As in the studies by Piotto (2002, 2006) and Nogueira, M. and Nogueira, M.A (2017) – and unlike the international studies mentioned previously in this text -, the families' main motivation was financial. In the case of those interviewed for this work, this motivation is associated with the economic crisis that hit the country at the end of 2014, leading the most unprotected fractions of the middle classes to compress their budget - although it is known that, alongside the health plan private sector, expenses with private educational institutions tend to be subject to heavy financial sacrifices by this social group (Nogueira, 2013a). In this regard, one of the mothers states, bluntly:

And then there was the [economic] crisis (...) my husband works in the engineering area. And there was the crisis and we, for financial reasons... I said: “We have to hurry and put her [the only daughter] in public school”. Because private schools are very expensive (...) they cannot afford it. (Renata. Research interview, April 2019).

Another mother, when talking about her recent choice for public school, lists a series of expenses that worried her about private school: tuition, uniform, books, registration, and food. Meanwhile, at EMOB the daughter has free snacks and lunch.

In the case of the third mother interviewed, the economic dimension is part of the set of reasons for choosing a public school, but it is accompanied by political justifications, like those formulated by many families participating in the English and French surveys – mentioned above – which revealed the role played, in the choice of educational establishment, by civic ideals, to the detriment of individual interests:

But the decision, for example, for public schools, in addition to being due to financial necessity, is also because I believe that public schools are the place where we will be able to transform society (...)

I think that for the formation of people (as individuals, as citizens) it is very important to live in the public school environment because it is there that we have all the contradictions of society, and it is where we have the opportunity to learn to deal with these contradictions, collectively... have more awareness, class awareness, racial awareness, gender awareness... and to be able to face these inequalities. (Olivia. Research interview. August 2019).

When asked about other families' options for the private education network, this same mother said:

I think it's very selfish... we retreat into a bubble, forgetting everything else, you know? So, for me, there won't be emancipation, there won't be freedom if we don't have everyone together. (Olivia. Research interview. August 2019.)

It is important to clarify that Olivia stood out, among all the mothers who made up the Family Committee, for her strong political commitment, due to her work in social movements. If their statements refer to the conduct of “engaged citizenship”, as defined by English researchers, their criteria for choosing a school also comply with educational principles that reject authoritarian education, in defense of pedagogical principles of respect to their childish nature, in addition to their concern with enabling their daughters to live with people who are “different from themselves”, in the French expression, or “not like us”, in the English lexicon:



But for this early childhood, from 7 to 9 years old, [the teaching content] was not a determining factor for me. I was more concerned, then, with the environment, with the coexistence, with the relationships that they [the two daughters] were going to establish there if they were going to be respected as children (...) I have a panic about authoritarian education... so, for example, military school is something that I don't consider and that [military schools] are considered good in terms of content (Olivia. Research interview. August 2019).

If financial limitations were a reason raised by all the families interviewed, and the justification based on principles (political and educational) was a motivation presented alone by Olivia, in the case of two families, justifications based on negative experiences with private schools. One of the mothers, whose daughter had academic difficulties at the private institution where she attended the second year of elementary school, felt outraged by the recommendation, by the pedagogical coordination, that she look for a private teacher for the girl:

“[They said:] Mom, you have to put your daughter in a private class so she can keep up” (...). [I thought:] But she's already in a private school, I put her up for that (...) and I must pay for private classes, for teachers to give tutoring classes, so it doesn't justify it” (...). If I must do this, I'll send her to a public school and pay for private lessons” (Ana. Research interview, October 2018).

Although there are differences regarding motivations and justifications, all families - as well as those interviewed by Piotto (2002; 2006) and those investigated by Nogueira (2017) - carefully selected the establishment, among the schools that make up the public education network. The search for elements that would ensure the best possible choice took place both through “hot” information (Van Zanten 2009a) about the range of schools considered - that is, based on evaluations made by known people who supposedly have some practical knowledge about the public network -, as well as through “cold” information, that is, based on objective data resulting from rankings of establishments published in the media and systemic assessments implemented by government bodies. The statements below express these two ways of prospecting data that would consolidate their choices:

(...) I did some research, through word of mouth: “Does your daughter study at a public school? Which school? What do you think?” (...) So, I did the research, then everyone recommended Olavo Bilac (...) which is a good school, with good teaching (...). But in the region, it's the best there was, at least in the research I did, word of mouth: friends, people I know, neighbors. (Ana. Research interview, October 2018).

Of course, if we think that... among public schools, here [at Olavo Bilac] it's better (...) this issue of content [of teaching], of IDEB. But... and it's something that we also need to worry about because we also must have this formal training. (Olivia. Research interview, August 2019).

Still on the criteria for choosing a school, a very prominent element in the statements concerns the public, or, in more elucidative terms, the characteristics (social, ethnic, and even academic) of the peer group with whom the children will have to live. As seen with international literature, even in the case of English and French families who deliberately choose to mix their children with peers of different social and ethnic origins, there is always a concern that they also have peers whose family socialization is like that of their children. And, for the families in the Brazilian study carried out by Piotto (2002, 2006), “mixing” is something to be avoided.

In the present research, when asked about the occupational situation of the parents of her daughter's classmates, one of the mothers interviewed highlights her perception of relative diversity, but her emphasis is on more qualified occupations, and closer to her class position:

It's a mix (...). You get businessman parents, you get parents with college degrees, I'm an architect, there's E. who's an architect, there's A. who's a teacher, there's P. who's a sociologist (...). In the students' classroom, there are more teachers, there are engineers(...). They are administrators, and they have lawyers. And then there are the simpler parents, who have no training whatsoever. (...)In the region, it is the [school] that has the best, highest [social] profile. (Ana. Research interview, October 2018).

It seemed very revealing that this same mother declared, in a very positive way, that “In the building where I live there is a teacher who is from there, from Olavo Bilac”.

However - and in the opposite way - the data are even more incisive when it comes to families seen as “different from themselves”. In this case, the fear of the negative influence of coexistence with others considered “undesirable” is clear (Van Zanten, 2009b, p. 34). One of the mothers, when saying that she even refused the school that had been assigned to her - through the georeferencing criteria - by the government body in charge of managing the enrollment sectorization devices, states:

Because the school they [the municipality's Department of Education agency] put her [her daughter] in has a lot of social risk (...) And Olavo Bilac is better (...) Not that there isn't [social risk], but that it was better (...) (Renata. Research interview, April 2019).

Another mother interviewed when reporting details of her “word of mouth” research on public establishments in the region, states:

Which has the Machado de Assis Municipal School, then they told me [that] it had a lower profile. There's that [school] up there... which is closer to the community (...) so they said: “No way, don't go” because it's close to the favela (...). So, in the region, which they [known people] told me about, the best municipal school is Olavo Bilac, with the best profile. Due to the region where it is located, there aren't that many buses, there aren't any shops... So, it already limits people from going a little. But that doesn't mean they won't. That the public school is already supposed to be public. For everyone, it's not about selecting people, it's for everyone. (Ana. Research interview, October 2018).

Ana's statement, in the excerpt above, has content equivalent to that of one of the mothers interviewed in Piotto's research (2006, p. 46), who states that the school in question (Escola Guimarães Rosa) was chosen, among other reasons, because “*there was a reputation for not having many children from the outskirts*”, which was favored by the location: “*You have to have a car here, it's difficult to get there by bus, it's a good neighborhood*”. Thus, the location would operate, in Piotto's words, a kind of “natural selection” that would attract middle-class parents, since students from lower classes could only attend school if their families could afford public transportation. This was also observed at the Olavo Bilac School, where, alongside the private cars mentioned by professionals and allocated to middle-class families, many school buses and vans transported children. In other words, even popular families who kept their children at school were, in some way, relatively “selected” for the possibility of paying for this type of transportation.

In addition to families' motivations for choosing public schools, it is also important to know the strategies that surround the act of choice. In the case of the mothers interviewed, after deciding on Escola Olavo Bilac, they waged a real battle, lasting a few months, to get the place. One of them, Ana, narrates the difficult process faced by her and her neighbor, Renata, both members of the Commission, to enroll their daughters in school. As they got both places, the girls joined Olavo Bilac together:

It wasn't easy (...) because the school is the best in the region, and everyone speaks highly of it, so the demand in the region is very high. It wasn't easy (...) so I went to Regional, there was no vacancy. (...) I said: “My option is Olavo Bilac”. She [Regional employee] said: “So you'll have to wait (this was in October), you'll have to wait for February. Classes start on February 2nd, so yes, you go to school to see if you can do it.” So, Renata [neighbor and mother of his daughter's friend] and I went there to [Escola Olavo Bilac] (...) [The school secretary] said: “Look, you have to go to the regional one”. Then we went to explain: “We already went to the regional, there are no vacancies there (...)”. She [the secretary] said: “Really, we don't have any vacancies, you have to wait”. And since there was me and Renata, it wasn't just one vacancy, there were two vacancies, in the same series. She said: “I might be able to get a place. Could it be. But I won't guarantee it. You go home, I'll call” (...) So I waited a week, then I went there, every day I called, I went there... (...) So, I mean, the chances of getting a place there were zero. Then the luck was that there were two parents there who asked for a transfer, changed cities, and then we got a place. (Ana. Research interview, October 2018).

As the international research examined in the second section of this text, one element caught attention in the data collected: the finding that parents from middle-class strata who chose public schools

were affected by strong “anxiety” and “fear” arising from the “risks” they take when putting their children in contact with “the other”, with those who are “not like us”. In the same way as in the analyses by Crozier et al. (2008) and Reay et al. (2007), a strong dose of anxiety was present in the speech of those surveyed, whether due to fear of influences considered harmful to their children's behavior or due to uncertainties regarding possible negative consequences on their academic performance, resulting from living with colleagues who would not value academic success sufficiently. The feelings expressed by Renata and Ana, in their interviews, seem to align with this same interpretative key:

(...) I was very insecure about public schools despite having studied in public schools my whole life. But you get scared because (...) different realities and such...(...) so, I thought, my mentality, that it was safer to keep her [the daughter] in a private school. And we also had good financial conditions (...). And with great insecurity, I placed [her daughter in public school]. And it surprised me, because today I say that I don't take her out of public school anymore, because I think she developed much more than she was developing in the private school [the one her daughter attended before being enrolled at Olavo Bilac, which had difficulties and was suggested to look for a private teacher]. (Renata. Research interview, April 2019).

(...) my biggest fear was leaving private school and going to a public school because public school... I studied at a public school, but today everyone talks so badly about public schools (Ana. Research interview, October 2018).

## THE CHOICE EXPERIENCED IN EVERYDAY PUBLIC SCHOOL

In addition to the motivations and care in the process of choosing a public school, as well as the initial strategies to alleviate the insecurities that surrounded it, the observations and interviews carried out allowed access to some dimensions of the experience lived by families in their daily relationship with this institution. The empirical data collected allows us to support that ambivalence is one of the strongest characteristics of this experience.

On the one hand, there was satisfaction and, more than that, a positive surprise from families with the benefits arising from the free service and more abundant resources than they expected to find in a public institution. In this sense, one of the mothers reported that her daughter said she was surprised by the fact that “the mayor who runs the school (...) everything is free. We go to the cinema and don't have to pay.” The positive surprise with the structure of the *Escola Integrada*<sup>7</sup> (size of the space, presence of a swimming pool and courts) also makes up the set of advantages of the Olavo Bilac school, even though many reservations are presented regarding the service of the scholarship holders, monitors, and teachers responsible for this Program.

The fear regarding children's intellectual development, although it marked the set of dilemmas before choosing Olavo Bilac, does not mark the families' experience after entering school. On the contrary, the rhythm and pedagogical approach of EMOB seems to please those mothers whose children had difficulties adapting to the private schools they previously attended, which, according to one of the interviewees, “didn't bother with the subject” and were not concerned with “the teaching, the interest of the student.” Renata's statement, presented at the end of the previous topic, illustrates this statement when the mother says that she was surprised by her daughter's development at EMOB, which was greater than at the private school she attended before.

On the other hand, if families generally do not express dissatisfaction with the quality of education, several statements and attitudes indicate insecurity regarding the stability of good service, as well as expressing more specific aspects than, as one of the mothers said, “it can improve”. These aspects will be detailed in the next topic of this text. Before providing such details, it is worth noting that the experiences of children and their families take on specific contours in public schools, being marked both by comparison with the private schools previously attended and by the attempt to control the various dimensions of school life from pedagogical to administrative. Thus, the families surveyed, although they

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<sup>7</sup> “*Escola Integrada*” refers to the full-time program of the Belo Horizonte municipal education network, developed during school hours. In the case of Escola Olavo Bilac, the Program serves only a portion of the students and operates in a rented building outside the school, with a good structure for activities, including a swimming pool and a court.

were surprised by the advantages offered by the Olavo Bilac school, expressed, in different ways, the need to improve what does not seem sufficient to them, given that the standard of sufficiency is built based on private institutions that they met<sup>8</sup>. Although this type of attitude could be present in the private school, in the form of complaints as customers of the establishment, at Olavo Bilac, due to its nature as a public institution, and to the receptive and inclusive stance of the current management, the demands and family collaborations<sup>9</sup> are justified as citizen participation in democratic and transparent management. Several times, the dimensions of openness by the management, collaboration, and families were reiterated throughout the Family Commission meetings, to introduce complaints or even make demands.

The intervention required by the families surveyed in the daily life of the school cannot be extended to all middle-class families who use public schools, but it illuminates specificities that would not take place in schools with less permeability of management to family demands, as in the case of previously attended private schools<sup>10</sup>. A situation mentioned by one of the mothers interviewed illustrates this point. She states that faced with complaints from a group of parents at the private institution her daughter attended, the principal scheduled a “coffee” to listen to the families but did not give them real space to speak during that meeting. Once at Escola Olavo Bilac, this mother, well-informed about the mechanisms and resources available to users of public schools, in addition to presenting her demands to the principal, teachers, and coordinators, claims to be able to “defend her daughter’s rights” within the scope of education secretariat and sub-secretariats:

I talked to the principal the same way: “Amanda, whenever I come to talk to you if I see that my daughter is experiencing embarrassment, that she is not learning, that she is not able to keep up, which is the role of the school, I’ll come here and demand you, and if I see that you haven’t solved it, I’ll go to the teacher. If I see that the teacher hasn’t resolved it, I’ll go to the media... as I, as a mother, am obliged to defend my daughter’s rights.” She [said], “No, you’re right.” But I’ve always been like this. And the parents I live with are all like that. (Ana, research interview, October 2018).

In addition to the teaching issues, a dimension of the experience of middle-class families in public schools that is generally experienced in a very ambivalent way is that of coexistence with diversity. In research on the presence of the middle classes in mixed and comprehensive schools in France and England, one premise stands out in the set of families’ justifications for choosing the establishment: the defense of public schools as a privileged locus for building an integrative and non-conflictive relationship between social classes. However - as already pointed out - the other side of this same attitude was designated by English researchers as “self-interested altruism” (Reay et al., 2007), which brings together two elements: the ethical and political commitment materialized in the option for public school and the consequent advantage of daily coexistence with diversity, which would favor the civic and existential formation of children. Among the families covered in this study, contact with diversity appeared as a positively valued consequence, although, except for Olívia, it did not constitute a criterion for choice, only being recognized from the experience at the institution:

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<sup>8</sup> Except for Olívia, whose children always attended public school. In her case, the controls and demands placed on the school are based not on experiences with the private network, but on an ideal of a contemporary republican public school: diverse, critical, engaged, democratic, and of quality.

<sup>9</sup> The families’ collaborative actions were varied. Ana, an architect, was available to do small projects for school renovations. The principal also asked the mothers to help her call the city hall to ask for the pruning of the trees that surround the school. An action often mentioned and praised by the principal at the Family Committee meetings was the creation of an EMOB vegetable garden. The project, led by a father, was cited by the principal as an example of productive interaction between families and schools.

<sup>10</sup> In the world of public schools there is also a diversity of ways in which management deals with families’ demands. In the case of the institution that was part of Piotto’s research (2002; 2006), for example, the principal had a less welcoming stance towards the demands of middle-class families and even stood directly against some intervention attempts. In any case, as this research by Piotto was carried out more than two decades ago, the expectation is that discussions about democratic management in the field of public education, intensified since then, will have an increasingly strong effect of permeating the participation of families.

For example, at the [private school] it's a selection of people, it's a little group there and you take 10 students, 15 students in the room, and you form that perfect little group, of dreams, so much so that she [the daughter] it was to have contact with a physically disabled child, autistic, at Olavo Bilac, and she said: "Mom, I didn't know". I mean, I didn't even realize that my daughter didn't have this awareness of the situation, and there [Olavo Bilac] she has this relationship. [...] As much as you want the best for your child, you must understand that your child must live in this world, which has children with disabilities, with Down Syndrome, simpler children. Because she said that there are very simple children there because there are friends of hers who say that they don't even have many toys, they just have a doll. So, she is having this contact with this child, I think this is very good for her (Ana. Research interview, October 2018).

However, except for *Olívia* again, who includes among the reasons for her choice the defense of public schools, the ethical or altruistic dimension not only does not appear but also does not seem to make sense in the moral grammar of families, who consider sacrifice valuable of the family budget in favor of paying for private schools. In this way, leaving private schools can generate suffering and a burden of justification. This is one of the meanings which the "testimony" can be understood, during one of the Family Commission meetings, from one of the participating mothers, who, initially afraid to enroll her child at Olavo Bilac, confessed to being positively surprised by the institution, which encouraged her to defend the construction of a marketing campaign to publicize the school's quality:

I'm going to give a little testimony. I was very reluctant to put my son here. Mother wants the best for her son, doesn't she? And then I was unemployed, so I said "guys, I want a private school", I want, I want, I want, and I couldn't do it and I knew he was going to come here (...) And I'm surprised by what my son is doing learning (...) So, I think a school appreciation campaign would be interesting, an act of starting to publicize the cool things that are available here. (...) Why is the UMEI [belo Horizonte municipal network's early childhood education unit] so valued? Marketing. They started advertising on television: because it's a reference, (...) it's good, it's good, it's good; and I think that would be cool. Let's start promoting it, let's start showing what the school has to offer. (Raquel, mother of a student and member of the Family Committee. Excerpt from transcript of the Family Committee meeting, April 2018).

The proposal to publicize "the cool things" "that the school has to offer" can take on a sense of validation that, instead of just highlighting satisfaction with the choice of public school, also seems to signal a certain amount of ambiguity and insecurity in the families' relationship with this institution, especially considering the context of strong aspiration to private schools, so emphasized in Raquel's statement and others. This hypothesis gains more strength when considering the constant search for adjustments, translated into the idea of "making the school better", which marks the Family Commission's initiative and is confirmed in various strategies and attitudes towards school, some of which will be described in the next topic of the text. Such strategies and attitudes suggest that, although positively surprised by some aspects linked to the free service, good structure and even teaching at Escola Olavo Bilac, these families treat the institution's pedagogical quality as something permanently under suspicion and, therefore subject to surveillance and intervention, which they are willing and feel, in some way, authorized to carry out.

## **FAMILY STRATEGIES BASED ON THEIR CHOICE**

As previously discussed, the attempt to control the functioning of educational establishments is a common trait among the families investigated. This trait unfolds in a diverse set of strategies that range from constant presence at school and intensive surveillance of its professionals to active participation in its information, consultation, and decision-making bodies (class and administration councils, student parents' associations, etc.), including close monitoring of children's education and academic progress. The most evident of these strategies was the creation of the "Family Commission" – despite its short duration, at least during the time the research was carried out –, but there are others that also deserve to be highlighted.

Concerning monitoring her children's education, one of the mothers indicates both monitoring in the domestic space, through supervision of notebooks and conversations with her daughter, and the initiative of going to school to check information - strategies that were also adopted, in general, for other families:

I take out the notebooks and see what's there, what's not there, what's being done, what's not there. Then there was the time when I took her [daughter's] English notebook when in the middle of the year, the notebook had two pages filled out, I said: '- She's not studying English'. Then she said: '- Ah, the English teacher hardly gives any content!', so I said: '- I'm going to go there and find out if she doesn't give content because if she teaches, the problem is you, not her'. Because how will she pass the content if the student doesn't study it! So, I went there, I was embarrassed, but I went. I got there, everyone's notebook was complete, only hers was not. (Ana. Research interview, October 2018).

When asked to evaluate the Olavo Bilac school, this mother responded:

"Although it is a big school, it is a good school, if you accompany your child to school. You can't leave... Like any school." (Ana. Research interview. October 2018).

It is clear, in this statement, that monitoring the children's school life is not because they are attending a public school but would be carried out in "any school". In another excerpt from the interview, Ana states that she did the same at the private school where her daughter studied before:

There was, there was [the same attitude of monitoring and questioning, at the private school]. The same situation, so that, when I went there to ask questions, it's... a question of teaching, of seeing that my daughter wasn't learning her homework, she couldn't formulate, respond, or read or understand what she was reading, I went to school. I would go there and say: "My daughter is not like this; she is not like this. Why?". (...) Then they had an excuse: "It's her age, and she has enough time to learn, don't worry" (Ana. Research interview, October 2018).

The intensive monitoring of their children's school life and the rational and proactive attitude concerning school performance and the demand for teaching considered effective - demonstrated in Ana's statements - constitute typical traits of middle-class families who, in a context of mass education and exacerbation of educational competition, they use the cultural, social, and economic resources they have to promote their children's education (Nogueira, 2013b; Fialho, 2012). In other words, there would be no relevance or originality in the findings, considering the research already exists in Brazil.

However, at the Olavo Bilac School and considering the group of middle-class families analyzed here, what draws attention is that, exactly as reported by Crozier et al., about the group they investigated: "When monitoring the children, the parents monitored the teachers and, when they were not satisfied, contacted the principal directly" (2008, p. 269, our translation). In the case of Olavo Bilac, they also contacted the teacher, demonstrating the attitudes of vigilance, privileged access to information, and questioning of pedagogical practices, as described by Van Zanten (2009a). Above all: whether by contacting the principal or by speaking directly to the teachers, attention was drawn to the horizontality established by these families concerning school professionals, and if not, the ascendancy they seemed to assume with them.

Ana, for example, reported a meeting in which parents previously mobilized via WhatsApp groups to question a teacher who had administered tests immediately after returning from the July holidays. When questioning, she took the opportunity to question the teacher about the treatment given to her daughter:

(...) the teacher said: "Ah, I'm strict". I said: "Look, we don't question you being strict. I think the teacher has to be strict, especially because there are 32 students, you have to be hard. But lack of education and lack of respect, no." So much so that the students, to give you an idea, made [mocking] music for the teacher. She said: "They are bullying me". I said: "Well (...) a 9-year-old kid is bullying you!" (...) Then I talked to her... "I'm talking to you, my daughter is arriving late to school because every morning she cries at home, she doesn't want to come to class because of you, because you're rude, you treat her with a lack of respect, you swear at her, so I don't admit it..." (...) I would like you to change with my daughter. I wish you wouldn't take

it personally and stalk her. (...) If I feel that you are doing this, we will have to take different measures, then it requires the education department, there are other means... Which until then is at school". (Ana. Research interview, October 2018).

In the excerpt above and others cited throughout this work, we highlight the tone that mothers address both the teacher and the principal, making use of their informational capital (in this case, information regarding educational bodies such as the Department of Education) to strengthen their demands. During the Family Committee meetings, the most diverse complaints and demands presented by mothers and fathers to the principal were listed: a teacher who used his cell phone excessively during classes; the delay in delivering school materials from the Ministry of Education to children; the fact that the school does not have a website where families could check their children's grades and schedule of events; the activities carried out by the school in the "after-school" period (*Programa Escola Integrada*).

In the specific case of the *Escola Integrada*, pedagogical and administrative issues were firmly questioned. Thus, a mother questioned whether her children had time to do their homework during after-school hours (at the opposite time to regular classes) and she did not agree. For her, homework should be done at home and, full-time, her children could take tutoring classes. Complaints also focused on the "unpreparedness" of full-time tutors. One of the mothers even suggested hiring new tutors. As several aspects of the functioning of the *Escola Integrada* were not satisfactorily answered by the principal, the mothers demanded that the full-time project coordinator participate in the Committee meetings.

Such complaints, as well as several excerpts from recordings of Family Commission meetings, highlight the range of school aspects in which mothers remain informed and feel authorized to intervene. As recorded, they denote the accent of authority in which families often address the principal, who seems cornered and defensive, to a certain extent "hostage" of the group of parents:

After a long discussion about the *Programa Escola Integrada*, with explanations from the principal, Ana questions that there was no meeting to "understand" the Program, and Amanda [school principal] says that Luana [PEI coordinator] is already planning it. Another mother, Letícia, returns to the subject of how *Mais Educação* is working at *Integrada* and says that there is no school support. Amanda says she has, but they keep arguing about it. Amanda explains everything again and says that those who need reinforcement are in reinforcement, which is not for all students, only for those who need it after being evaluated. Letícia says that she knows her son's needs and wants her son to be a backup. (Families Commission Meeting, March 2018).

Letícia repeats what she thinks about homework and tutoring; she emphasizes that she does not recognize the work that Amanda tells everyone goes on at *Escola Integrada*. Olívia explains that what Letícia wants, and that it is a demand, is that the pedagogical moments within *Integrada* are accompanied by mediators and not monitors without any training, including homework must be monitored by a mediator. Amanda explains that at the Department of Education, there are positions and responsibilities and she cannot change that. Olívia asks how much time per week the mediator spends with the children and Amanda says she "can't say"... The mother complains that she doesn't know and suggests that Luana be present to resolve these issues. Amanda says the meeting with Luana is already planned. (Families Commission Meeting, March 2018).

These mothers also show a strong presence at school, often with the explicit objective of supervising schoolwork. Two interviewed mothers reported, during the interviews, that they had the habit of going to school at different times, without prior scheduling, just to "see what's going on". On one occasion, one of them had been at school at lunchtime and, at the Commission meeting, asked the principal why the children were sitting on the floor watching TV after the meal. In her opinion, the children were not being well looked after, as there were no comfortable places for them to sit.

It is interesting to note that the relationship established between these families and the Olavo Bilac School appears, in these aspects, to be quite different from that verified by Piotto (2002; 2006) at the Guimarães Rosa School. In the latter, there were more numerous clashes and several situations in which the principal adopted strategies to protect herself and the teaching team from family interference. For example, there was a situation similar to the above, in which the presence of families at the school generated a complaint to the management. In the case of Guimarães Rosa, the mothers remained in the courtyard until the children entered the classroom and, therefore, noticed many teacher absences, requesting action. The principal's first action, then, was to prohibit families from staying in the courtyard

during entry time. At least during the period of field research, no equivalent measure was found by the principal of Olavo Bilac.

Finally, in line with Van Zanten (2009a), it was possible to see that the Family Committee became, for the mothers and fathers who participated in it, a space for privileged access to information about the school's operations. For example, a mother from the Commission knew when one of the teachers would return from leave, while the principal did not have this information. During Commission meetings, the principal presents participants with some information that most families at the school certainly do not have: data on dismissal and hiring of staff, including explaining details about the hiring process; details of the school's budget, as well as spending priorities set by the board; information about the processing of data by the municipal educational system and its limits, etc.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The proposal of this text was an exploratory approach to the choice of public school by Brazilian middle-class families and the resulting family-school relationship experience. The empirical data obtained, in addition to the results of existing national and international research, enabled us to raise some hypotheses and formulate questions that seem important both for the debate on the current educational context and for future studies.

First, the complexity of the school choice process was highlighted for the families involved. On the one hand, it is a rational process, in which, more explicitly or more subliminally, families carry out “cost x benefit” calculations and build strategies to monetize symbolic profits and/or repair damages. On the other hand, it is a process that also involves values, prejudices, insecurities, expectations, and anxieties, causing conflicts and dilemmas that are perhaps more intense precisely among the middle classes, or at least for some of their fractions, considering the social places borders they occupy or the conflicting pressures to which they are subjected.

As Crozier et al. (2008), the contemporary middle classes rely fundamentally, for their social reproduction, on educational strategies that presuppose, in some way, prioritizing private interests - which becomes socially validated through the image of “good parents” who promote the best conditions for the development of children. In the countries covered in the foreign literature used here, in which the public school was historically constructed as a republican and democratic value, the choice for it can bring symbolic profits, both in the sense of corresponding to a “good citizen” and in providing offspring conditions to form as such, preparing them to live in a complex and globalized world.

In the Brazilian case, on the contrary, in a scenario of much more pronounced and more naturalized inequalities, public schools have undergone, in recent decades, a strong process of discreditation. Both in the data discussed here and in those presented by Piotto (2002; 2006) and by Nogueira, M. and Nogueira, M.A (2017), middle-class fathers and mothers state that, although they studied in the public school system, they would like to cost of avoiding it in the education of children. In this social environment, in the Brazilian scenario, such avoidance is part of the social representation of being a “good father” or “good mother”. Thus, in these studies, the option for public schools is, in most cases, motivated primarily by financial reasons. The training benefits (linked to the experience of diversity, for example) appear secondarily, sometimes after a certain period of experience at school.

However, in addition to the differences, we observed, in the data collected in the present study, in the works of Piotto (2002; 2006) and Nogueira, M. and Nogueira, M.A (2017), in the English and French research consulted, the convergence of various elements relating to how choice is experienced in the context of public schools and the strategies created by families to support it without compromising the training project they have for their children. The first common element is the dose of anxiety and tension that surrounds this process. Another convergent aspect is that, in these different contexts, families use similar strategies to minimize the risks they consider involved in their options. Such strategies range from close monitoring of children's school life to direct participation in the school and management bodies, as a way of enabling monitoring of daily school life and intervention in it.

In his works, Van Zanten (2010, 2009a, 2007) even uses the term “colonization” to refer to this pressure exerted by families to influence, from their point of view, the public schools in which they enroll their children. The notion refers to the attitude of very mobilized parents who have the symbolic



and material resources to exert such pressure. In several situations, at Olavo Bilac, this notion seemed to make sense to analyze the relationship established, with the school, by the mothers of the Family Committee. The mothers claimed to be working for “school improvement” – and they certainly were, but an improvement based on their points of view and priorities, since the Commission was not representative.

For example, concerning the question about doing homework during *Escola Integrada* hours, the complaint does not necessarily represent most families, as most of them need their children to do their homework at school, as they do not have the material or cultural experiences to accompany them at home. On the other hand, demands that may eventually come from a large part of the school community – improvements in children's transport, hypothetically – may remain invisible to the extent that, although they do not constitute problems for the members of the Commission, they are not voiced by them.

In the Brazilian case, this analysis is especially relevant due to the atypicality that the presence of the middle classes (at least in their most favored fractions) in public schools represents among us. The data analyzed indicate that, when this presence occurs, it is configured in the context of competition between establishments that penalize those from which the middle classes flee, which are attributed to the stigma of “community schools” or with “social risk” audiences”, as mentioned by the mothers interviewed. Within establishments that receive the middle classes, those who manage to vocalize their demands occupy an extremely ambiguous place, as they are formally subject to the same rules and holders of the same rights, but in practice, they may end up benefiting.

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## **AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTION**

Author 1 - Project coordinator, active participation in data analysis, writing the text, and final review of the text.

Author 2 - Data collection, active participation in data analysis, writing the text, and final review of the text.

Author 3 - Data collection, active participation in data analysis, writing the text, and final review of the text.

## **DECLARATION OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest with this article.

**DECLARATION OF APPROVAL FROM THE RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE**

FEDERAL UNIVERSITY OF MINAS GERAIS - UFMG  
RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE – COEP/UFMG

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The UFMG – COEP Research Ethics Committee approved, on March 26, 2018, the research project entitled “Challenges and Possibilities of the family-school relationship in the public education network” (*Desafios e possibilidades da relação família-escola na rede pública de ensino*) as well as the Informed Consent Form.