

## DOSSIER

*The sociology of family-school relationships: social reconfigurations and new analytical and methodological perspectives*

## The Tiger on the Raft: exclusion and contradiction in the routine of a scholarship student at a private school

### *O Tigre na Jangada: exclusão e contradição na rotina de um aluno bolsista na escola privada*

Ricardo Boklis Golbspan<sup>a</sup>  
ricardo.golbspan@ufrgs.br

Luís Armando Gandin<sup>a</sup>  
luis.gandin@ufrgs.br

## ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to contribute to the field of sociological studies of education regarding family-school relations. With this intention, the investigation aims to understand how a young scholarship student from a working-class family, from a second-year class in a private upper-middle-class school, faces exclusion in his school routine. Exploring an exceptional class contradiction – a student from a working-class family in an upper-middle-class school – paves the way for understanding the processes of exclusion within Brazilian private schools, which still remain as a sociological “closed box”. Methodologically, the “ethnographic imagination” is mobilized, according to Paul Willis, and scenes of the school routine resulting from participant observation are presented, in addition to interviews with students and teachers. The discussion indicates the various dimensions of the process of exclusion experienced by the student studied within the private school, highlighting 1) symbolic power and material inequality, operating in conjunction with the day-to-day schooling process of the scholarship student; 2) institutional legitimation, through school discourses, regarding the student’s academic failure; 3) the forms of mediation and negotiation with which the student actively responds to school exclusion. The results of the research point to the importance of microsociological research within schools for the proper understanding and interruption of educational inequalities.

**Keywords:** Family-School Relations. Middle Classes. Ethnography. Youth.

## RESUMO

Este trabalho de pesquisa procura contribuir com o campo de estudos sociológicos da educação a respeito das relações família-escola. Com essa intenção, a investigação tem como objetivo compreender como um jovem bolsista de família de classe trabalhadora, de uma turma de segundo ano do Ensino Médio de uma escola privada de classe média alta, enfrenta a exclusão na sua rotina escolar. Explorar uma excepcional contradição de classe – um aluno de família de classe trabalhadora na escola de classe média alta – abre caminho para a compreensão dos processos de exclusão no interior da escola privada brasileira, que ainda permanece como

<sup>a</sup> Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS), Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil.

uma “caixa fechada” sociológica. Metodologicamente, é mobilizada a “imaginação etnográfica”, de acordo com Paul Willis, sendo apresentadas cenas da rotina escolar decorrentes de observação participante, além de entrevistas com estudantes e professores. A discussão indica as diversas dimensões do processo de exclusão por que passa o aluno pesquisado no interior da escola privada, destacando-se: 1) o poder simbólico e a desigualdade material operando em articulação no dia a dia do processo de escolarização do aluno bolsista; 2) a legitimação institucional, através dos discursos escolares, a respeito do fracasso escolar do estudante; 3) as formas de mediação e negociação com que o aluno, ativamente, responde à exclusão escolar. Os resultados da pesquisa apontam para a importância da investigação microssociológica, no interior das escolas, para a devida compreensão, e interrupção, das desigualdades educacionais.

**Palavras-chave:** Relações Família-Escola. Classes Médias. Etnografia. Juventudes.

## Introduction

This paper seeks to contribute to the field of sociological studies of education regarding family-school relations. With this intention, the investigation consists of an object of study that – as we will discuss in more detail below – we consider to be distinctive. In addition to the object of the research, the conceptual and methodological perspectives, which are also distinct, aim, as we argue below, to further develop the established approaches. Ultimately, this text, in an effort to engage in constructive dialogue with the collective production of the field, asks: *how does a young scholarship student from a working-class family, in a second-year class of high school in an upper-middle-class private school, deal with exclusion in his/her school routine?* Two main justifications are presented for undertaking such an investigation.

Firstly, in terms of the research subject, the focus here is on young high school student. In this study, the student, despite broader social constraints, is considered a protagonist in the educational process: a co-creator, alongside peers and other school stakeholders, of meaning, knowledge, and everyday school life. This perspective stands in contrast to the frequent marginalization of students not only by everyday pedagogical practices but also by educational policies and research. The decision to focus on a particularly young student relates to the array of social representations (Dayrell, 2007) that shape how these individuals are perceived during this stage of life. Youth, as a rule, struggle to find meaning within the school structure to address their central concerns (Dayrell, 2007). Some authors even compare youth to a social moratorium, as if young people exist, for educational policy, in a perpetual state of “becoming” (Dayrell, 2007). This research, therefore, pays close attention to what a young working-class student thinks and does in the present.

Secondly, the choice to investigate a working-class student in an upper-middle-class private school is viewed as a productive approach to analyzing inequality within the school environment. Focusing on Joakim’s<sup>1</sup> school experience addresses a gap in Brazilian sociological literature on education concerning the internal dynamics of upper-middle-class private schools. Complementing the influential body of sociological work on parental strategies in schooling their children (e.g., Nogueira, 2013), we argue that it is essential to “open the black box” of private schools to examine the processes of social reproduction that occur within their classrooms. We understand that

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<sup>1</sup> A fictitious name assigned to the student being studied.

exploring the class contradiction in the selected case paves the way for mapping and understanding the processes of exclusion within a Brazilian private school. This study provides a detailed account of the school experience of an “excluded insider,” one that approaches an ideal type — a student from a working-class family not only participating in the Brazilian school system but also within a privileged school. This exceptional class contradiction occurs in one of the most unequal school systems in the world (Pinto, 2019). Thus, we seek to investigate, in the field, the process described by Bourdieu and Champagne:

The educational system excludes as it always has, but now it does so continuously and at every level of the curriculum (...); and it keeps hold of those whom it excludes (...). It follows that these outcasts on the inside are forced, as a function of the fluctuations and oscillations of the system and its sanctions, to do a balancing act between enraptured adherence to the illusions the system proposes and resignation to its decrees, between anxious submission and powerless revolt (Bourdieu; Champagne, 1999, p. 425).

Having defined the research question and its justifications, we proceed in the following sections to analyze the processes of exclusion in the school routine of the scholarship student. To accomplish this, the next section outlines the methodological framework of the investigation, guided by the perspective of an “ethnographic imagination” (Willis, 2000), and describes the research instruments used. Following this, Section 3 discusses the data generated in the field, drawing on theoretical categories to interpret the analyzed routine in relation to the processes of social reproduction within the school. Finally, in Section 4, we conclude the discussion by synthesizing the findings and offering some final considerations.

## Ethnography of an “outcast on the inside” student

The discussion in this text stems from a broader ethnography that investigated the school routine of a high school class at an upper-middle-class private school. At this point, the work of Paul Willis (2000) served as the main inspiration, in the name of an “ethnographic imagination”:

The juxtaposition of ‘ethnographic’ and ‘imagination’ is meant to surprise, condition and change the meaning of both. The two may seem far apart, ethnography faithfully reporting ‘the reality’ of the everyday, imagination deliberately seeking to transcend the everyday. But, actually, for its own full development ethnography needs a theoretical imagination which it will not find, ‘there’, descriptively in the field. Equally, I believe that the theoretical imaginings of the social sciences are always best shaped in close tension with observational data. [...] Ethnography provides the empirical and conceptual discipline. Ethnography is the eye of the needle through which the threads of the imagination must pass. Imagination is thereby forced to try to see the world in a grain of sand, the human social genome in a single cell. Experience and the everyday are the bread and butter of ethnography, but they are also the grounds whereupon and the stake for how grander theories must test and justify themselves. They should not be self-referenced imaginings but grounded imaginings (Willis, 2000, p. ix).

Ethnography, in this context, is understood as “a family of methods involving direct and sustained social contact with agents” (Willis; Trondman, 2008, p. 12), and it entails writing “richly

about the encounter, respecting, recording, and representing, at least in part, the irreducibility of human experience” (Willis; Trondman, 2008, p. 12). In this sense, we acknowledge the limits, in terms of generalization, of an ethnographic, microsociological study that delves into the experience of a specific individual. However, while we approach the research as a collective endeavor, our aim is not to refute macrosociological studies or other productions in the field of the Sociology of Education that similarly address family-school relationships. On the contrary, the goal is to contribute to the field by adding an investigation that, although not revealing broad trends, may highlight, in the richness of detail, research findings that have been little explored so far.

In the research process, ethnography was operationalized methodologically through participant observation, with field notes recorded every morning during 3 months in a classroom of a second-year high school class — along with various observations in optional classes and informal socialization moments occurring in the afternoons. The research also included other methodological procedures: a) analysis of school documents, b) interviews with the administrative team, c) interviews with the class’s teachers, d) semi-structured individual interviews with each student, e) focus groups formed from affinities within the class, and f) personal diary reports written or sent by students<sup>2</sup>. In this text, specifically concerning the experience of the student Joakim, the highlighted methodological instruments are participant observation, interviews with a teacher, individual interviews with the student, and analysis of video diaries sent by the student.

Given the particularity of the research context — an upper-middle-class school — it is important to highlight the characteristics of the investigated community. The institution in question is a traditional school, here referred to as Colégio Arcoverde, with over 100 years of history and approximately 1,000 students. The school operates from early childhood education through high school, is private and religious, and charges some of the highest tuition fees in the city—located in a relevant and urbanized capital, in a middle-class neighborhood close to the city center<sup>3</sup>. Additionally, it is important to note that the school’s Pedagogical Project emphasizes its “community and philanthropic character,” stating that it does not operate for profit. The document mentions provisions for serving “families with lower purchasing power, to whom scholarships are allocated.”. This reality is reflected in the class under study, which had three students on full scholarships. Additionally, regarding the class composition, Class 22, from the second year of high school, was characterized not only by the aforementioned geographical and economic factors but also by the occupations of the families (Salata, 2016). The majority of students in this class were from families with liberal or mid-tier occupations — doctors, architects, university professors, engineers, etc. — the cohort was thus considered to belong to the upper-middle-class.

Joakim’s nuclear family consists of him and his single mother, who works in the service sector<sup>4</sup>, and they reside in a neighborhood on the outskirts of the city. In line with contemporary sociological literature (e.g., Salata, 2016), we understand that the fact that Joakim’s family does not belong to the poor population does not automatically elevate them to middle class status. The

<sup>2</sup> Joakim chose to create his diary in video format, as specified in the discussion that follows.

<sup>3</sup> The name of the school is fictitious, and the name of the city is kept anonymous to protect the informants’ data.

<sup>4</sup> At the student’s request, the profession is not disclosed.

myth of a “new Brazilian middle class” (Cardoso, 2020), associated with the political narrative of the temporary increase in the working class’s purchasing power, can obscure the definitions of social class position. Joakim is a student from a working-class family, and, as we will show, he aspires to social mobility through his education. Regarding the student’s characterization, it is relevant to note that Joakim identified himself as white and heterosexual. In the following section, his characterization as a student and the way he navigates school will be examined.

## A radiography of exclusion

This section presents data collected from the field, using different methodological tools: (a) field notes for participant observation; (b) an excerpt from an interview with one of Joakim’s teachers; (c) a semi-structured interview with the student. From these data, along with brief contextualization and description, the analysis of Joakim’s experience of exclusion in Class 22 at Colégio Arcoverde is grounded.

### (a) Field Notes: The Production of Exclusion

Firstly, we invite a closer examination of the italicized excerpts below, which refer to field notes written during the first two weeks of observation when the researcher had not yet known the student’s social background. These notes reveal Joakim’s routine in the class, functioning as “vignettes” (Bartlett; Vavrus, 2017), which transport the reader into the classroom. After each excerpt, theoretical reflections are offered, grounded in Bourdieusian concepts, to contextualize the statements in relation to the objectives of this article. The aim is to construct a critical examination of the everyday experience of an “excluded insider” within a private school.

*In the first period, Mathematics, Joakim, the only one sitting alone, decides to approach me, asking if I had passed the entrance exam for a federal university and seizing the opportunity to ask if he could sit with me. Meanwhile, Mr. Beto quickly writes the content — angles and arcs — on the board. The two periods of Mathematics unfold with, on the one hand, exercises quickly copied and solved (as Joakim comments, “Beto is too fast, we don’t even have time to think”), and on the other hand, photos of the board taken by Sérgio and shared virtually with the class.*

Early on, some hypotheses arise: the idea that Joakim may be solitary in the class routine emerges; there is also a growing suspicion, due to his interest in the researcher’s background and dedication to copying from the board, that he believes in the “pedagogical authority” of the school (Bourdieu; Passeron, 1970), that is, in the legitimacy of the educational institution and the pedagogical actions exercised within it (Nogueira, C.; Nogueira, M., 2002). Additionally, there is a self-demanding attitude as he struggles to keep up with the speed of the professor, indicating that he does not possess, to the same degree as his peers, the codes necessary for the assimilation of school culture (Bourdieu, 1998). These hypotheses are reinforced over time, as shown in the following field note:

*Mr. Martinelli [of History], after 15 or 20 minutes of distraction, explains the trajectory of Luís Carlos Prestes to a suddenly attentive class, describing how he became a communist, while also debating Vargas' populism and how it flirts with fascism, eventually focusing on the history of Olga, mentioning the movie about her, which, of course, for the professor, everyone must have access to on Netflix. Joakim's question, "Does this appear on the entrance exam?", a question that might be relevant in other contexts, is ignored by the class, who are more interested in the story of this character. When the class ends, it is Joakim, ever dedicated, who rises to erase the board — a practice that none of the other students had adopted throughout the days.*

The way evaluation is handled in this scene reveals another dimension of class inequalities in the school culture, as seen in Joakim's class routine. Learning about Prestes' and Olga's histories appears to the class as something beyond simply memorizing or verifying knowledge for exams. Joakim brings an urgency regarding the entrance exam that is not recognized by the class, who, with their silence and attention, value the knowledge shared for its intrinsic worth rather than its practical use.

The student here resembles a group that Bourdieu (1974) described as "oblates" (Nogueira, 1997), reflecting on lower fractions of the middle class striving for social ascension through cultural capital. Although it must be emphasized that Joakim comes from a working-class family, it is intriguing to consider how Bourdieu's theory helps explain how social distinction operates in relation to Joakim within the school. The oblates, initially outsiders, gain acceptance into a religious order through their faith and dedication (Nogueira, 1997). In the school context, these are individuals like Joakim, who invests effort and expects everything from the school's capital — one that is still recent and limited. Bourdieu (1987) describes oblates as those who have a "school-based relationship with culture" — not a dilettante relationship with culture (as exemplified by the class), but a serious and rigorous relationship (as Joakim demonstrates by his concern with exams). Tragically, this "school-based" relationship with culture is precisely the one depreciated by the school itself (Bourdieu; Passeron, 1970).

Another recurring aspect observed in both vignettes is Joakim's isolation in the classroom. If previously he was sitting alone, now he gets up alone, taking the initiative to prepare the board for the next teacher. There is silence in the class regarding this action: there is no overt approval or disapproval of Joakim's act. The hypothesis is that if there is any judgment, it is one of distance and estrangement. No one has ever commented on it, nor was there any need to; yet, in seemingly mundane daily practices, such as those observed in the class routine, the student gradually reveals himself as different from the expectations for students in this school. At this point, the concept of *habitus*, as discussed by Bourdieu (1996), can be employed to understand the process of exclusion that begins to take shape.

Bourdieu (1996), through this theoretical category, suggested that not only do the bodies of subjects exist in the world, but the world is also inscribed in the bodies, forming a "structuralist constructivism." Therefore, *habitus* is more than individual perceptions, opinions, habits, or attitudes; it is the embodiment, the inscription of the social world in individuals: it is "a socialized body, a structured body, a body that has internalized the immanent structures of the world or a specific



sector of that world, of a field, and that structures both the perception of the world and the action within it" (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 144). For Setton (2002), an important notion to understand *habitus* as the social embodied is the idea of a "system of dispositions." The way society influences people generates certain inclinations for thinking, feeling, and even for speaking, walking, eating, dressing, among other countless "dispositions" (Bourdieu, 1979). These dispositions do not determine individuals' destinies, but rather serve as a "matrix of perceptions" (Bourdieu, 1983, p. 65), guiding individuals' responses, which are creatively transformed, though relatively stable throughout life. In this sense, individuals are also shaped by shared histories, notably those of family or class (Bourdieu, 1979), as they carry in their bodies "the past and present" of a social position (Bourdieu, 1990).

By invoking the concept of *habitus* to understand Joakim's actions in the classroom, such as sitting alone or cleaning the board, it becomes possible to visualize the social class inscribed in his body. This is not about predicting his actions as if his class position determines his fate, but understanding how, as a young scholarship student from a working-class family, his inclinations regarding how to navigate the school field differ from those of his upper-middle-class peers, highlighting how his culture is perceived as "foreign" in the classroom. The following situation, a few days later, further indicates Joakim's "difference" in relation to his peers:

*Fábio [a student] enters the classroom wearing a neat jacket, and Joakim, one of the few who had arrived early [in the morning], comments, "Look at that style, really stylish." Fábio reacts with just a nod and a tight-lipped smile, remaining in a somewhat embarrassed but mostly indifferent silence, setting a boundary to the attempt at rapprochement. I am gradually understanding that the way Joakim speaks, the way he tries to connect, and now, how his comments possess a different organization than what is perceived as more appropriate to say. The awkward silence is broken as more students enter, with calculators on the desk projecting how much they need to recover, and with the start of the History class.*

This scene is significant in confirming a regularity of situations occurring within this upper-middle-class classroom, producing the perception that Joakim is the one who is out of place, who does not share the same "lifestyle" (Bourdieu; Passeron, 1970). This is how "symbolic power" (Bourdieu, 1987) operates: we see, through a series of seemingly banal scenes, a popular student attempting to breach the symbolic boundaries separating him from his peers, without success. Joakim's isolation, as can be verified, forms through a multiplicity of symbolic violences, effective for social classification, particularly because they do not present themselves as violence. This is not bullying, for instance, or direct injury against the student, but rather a class-based exclusion practice that, by being framed as merely a matter of affinity, is legitimized in the daily life of the class. This exclusive process was already evident in his sitting alone, cleaning the board, his utilitarian interest in the Math and History curriculum, and is also seen in the following chemistry class:

*Almost no one actually copies the board, but one student, Joakim, decides to ask a question about the material, as if seeking to normalize things [after a lengthy discussion about the class's relationship with the chemistry teacher]: "But what does enthalpy mean?" However, the response from a nervous Jaque [the teacher] sounds rude and unfortunate, suggesting that the answer to that question was obvious. [...] A nervous Jaque makes another mistake on the board, while Joakim, seated in the first row, looks around and behind him, as if seeking*

*a look of approval. I feel sorry for him, a dear student, but he seems to have no points of connection with the rest of the class.*

We chose to highlight this point further, as it also helps reveal Joakim's distance from the class culture. The class, in general, at this point, is debating with the teacher, questioning her teaching methods. Incorporating their privilege, the students feel entitled to question the pedagogical authority, as the more privileged ones perceive that, in this specific moment of crisis, they are not being properly served (Bourdieu, 1979). Joakim, in turn, does not align with the class, trying to resolve the crisis by asking about the content and sitting at the front. It does not seem reasonable, in his universe of action possibilities, to question the teacher. For an oblate, it would be wiser to compensate for the lack of cultural capital with "assiduous and hard work" (Bourdieu, 1987, p. 259-260).

It is also important to recall how, for Bourdieu (1987), cultural and symbolic distinctions are secondary to economic ones, functioning as "reinterpretations" of each other (Nogueira, 1997). And material differences also revealed themselves during the weeks of empirical work following the class. Inequalities were mutually confirmed in both cultural and economic dimensions, as we see in the following final excerpt from the field notes:

*Fernando and Joakim are talking about the school soccer game yesterday, in which Fernando scored two goals. Kim, the goalkeeper, laments that he had to take the bus and was out of phone credit, so he couldn't find the school where the game would be and missed playing.*

The situation above, relayed in class during a side conversation, points to a situation unthinkable for a student like Fernando. Like most of his peers, Fernando attends the team's games with his parents, carpooling with friends' families, or taking a taxi. It is assumed that all families own cars and have time to prioritize their children's activities, or at least have cell phones, internet, and credit cards to use a transportation app. As previously mentioned regarding Netflix subscriptions. When Joakim shares this unusual situation, not having the basic economic conditions compared to his peers, we can observe the relationship between the symbolic and the structural in the production of exclusion. The impact is double for Joakim: he not only cannot attend the soccer game with his peers but also exposes his "lifestyle," which is foreign to the class culture.

We also emphasize that this "lifestyle" is a product of how family, social class, and school integrate into educational strategies. As Nogueira (2023, p.175) observes, and as seen in the scene above, it is middle-class families that "demonstrate strong parental involvement in their children's life and academic success: participation in the daily activities of the educational institution." What we observe, therefore, in the "small" events of Joakim's school routine, are various manifestations of social inequalities at school. The author concludes: "Indeed, we know that families from different social groups do not have the same (material and cultural) conditions to accompany and enhance their children's educational life." Thus, the school routine of a working-class scholarship student in an upper-middle-class school becomes a stage where familial inequalities are lived.

As we will discuss next, the situation becomes even more dramatic when we add the institutional role of the school to the equation.



### **(b) Teacher's Account: The Legitimization of Exclusion**

In this subsection, an excerpt from an interview with Cristiano, a Writing teacher, is analyzed. There are at least two reasons for highlighting his statement.

First, it relates to the power of a multimethod approach, where the interview with a teacher complements the data obtained through observation. The interview, for example, gives prominence to the informant's perspective rather than the researcher's, and serves as a tool for verifying and confirming hypotheses, something crucial for the validity of qualitative research (Lareau; Rao, 2016). This justification also applies to the interview with Joakim, discussed in subsection (c).

Second, this excerpt from the interview is important because it comes from a pedagogical authority: the teacher. His words do not fully or uniquely represent his personal perspective, nor the official perspective of the school on Joakim, but they point to an important aspect of the school culture at Colégio Arcoverde. To some extent, it reflects the "common sense" of the school, i.e., the automatic responses and explanations readily available in the culture to address daily problems and challenges (Gandin, 2002). Analyzing the following excerpt in detail, as we do below, provides important insights into how the school endorses and, thus, contributes to the exclusion Joakim experiences in his school routine.

When Cristiano speaks about the difficulties the class faces in writing a "good" essay, he spontaneously remembers Joakim:

*Joakim is a boy who freaks out. And why? Because he has a distorted self-image. It's like this: he thinks he can do things that he's not capable of doing at the moment. So, instead of focusing on the essay, which is one of his biggest difficulties... instead of thinking: "What is my topic?" "The persistence of violence against women in Brazil." "So, what should I talk about... do I agree with this, do I not agree with this?" The first thing I do is conclude. Well, now, to talk about causes, we talk about development. How do I introduce it? I have to present an idea. We write mentally from the conclusion to the introduction; it's easier to think that way. Then Joakim, after an hour... he has an hour and a half to finish... he's still stuck on the introduction because he hasn't found the perfect word yet that will... impact. Because he wants a beautiful word. And I say, "first you figure out what to say, then you decorate it." He thinks the most important thing is the appearance, because if he gives the beautiful word at the beginning... you know? So, this difficulty he has, of establishing a reality for himself [...]. These are the situations, these are the cases of difficulty I see, let's put it this way. But I don't see any structural problems in the school.*

Cristiano's words represent another form of manifestation of the recurring observations in the field diaries regarding school exclusion. It shows the misalignment between the popular student and the culture expected and enforced in the petty-bourgeois school. After all, as we can see, Cristiano judges Joakim in this excerpt as a representative of school culture and the upper-middle-class fraction dominant in the school — the "new petty bourgeoisie" (Bourdieu, 1983).

This group, among the middle classes, possesses the highest cultural competence, demonstrating familiarity with "good taste" and marking a distinctive position in relation to the popular classes (Nogueira, 1997). It is a fraction of the middle class that, in terms of cultural capital,

is closest to the dominant classes, heavily investing in the acquisition of “correct” culture. Thus, the families in question invest in transmitting this cultural heritage “completely, early, and unconsciously from early childhood” (Nogueira, 1997, p. 118). This cultural baggage results in the already mentioned dilettante attitude toward culture, that is, a more uninterested and relaxed posture, less “school-like.” When Cristiano evaluates Joakim, we see how the reference (the “universal” or “good student”) is this subject who: opts for simplicity, as opposed to what Cristiano calls “decoration”; opts for content, as opposed to what the teacher sees as “appearance.” As a budding petty-bourgeois, the “good” student is one who is able to “become small to become bourgeois” (Nogueira, 1997, p. 113).

On the other hand, for Bourdieu (1979), disadvantaged students learn the “correct” culture late and explicitly, in school (Nogueira, 1997). We can see how this process of acquiring bourgeois culture is accentuated in Joakim’s case, being schooled in an upper-middle-class private school. Bourdieu (1979) speaks of a systematic effort, which results in a relationship with culture that is more “interested” than “uninterested,” more “tense” than “dilettante,” and more “forced” than “familiar.” Cristiano’s interview indicates how this relationship with culture manifests in Joakim’s inclinations, preferences, and tastes, specifically here in terms of essay writing. The class *habitus*, therefore, structures the process of exclusion, being identified and judged by the pedagogical authority. According to Cristiano’s words, Joakim spends his time searching for the “perfect word,” to “impact” — while a “good” student should use their time to figure out what they want to talk about, i.e., to trust their “own” judgment and “own” tastes — as if they were purely individual dispositions, and not class-based. In the highlighted excerpt, we identify how a “stamp” of school failure is applied, legitimizing the exclusion that the observed routine had already, in many other “small” moments, been producing.

Joakim, in his writing style, therefore, manifests, in a “disparate” way, what Bourdieu calls a “good cultural will” (1979). “Good cultural will” refers to the docility and reverence with which rising popular groups connect with the dominant culture (Nogueira, 1997). For Bourdieu (1979), groups who perceive themselves as poor in cultural capital, in their struggle for social classification, accumulate good cultural will as a form of protection against suspicions of ignorance and vulgarity (Nogueira, 1997). However, their practices reveal the artificiality of their cultural acquisition, from the revelation of their “disparate knowledge” (Bourdieu, 1979): they confuse vocabulary terms, artistic concepts, and do not correctly differentiate certain scientific sources, for example. In Joakim’s case, we can understand how the notion of “disparate” is useful to comprehend that his focus on vocabulary and style, which he reads as “correct,” ends up sounding forced, in contrast to the expected dilettante asceticism, which is the expected way to approach school writing production.

Another characteristic of these rising popular groups, identified in Cristiano’s words about Joakim, would be “hypercorrection” (Bourdieu; Passeron, 1970). This refers to the coexistence of, on the one hand, an awareness that “correctness” in manners is a crucial differentiator, and, on the other hand, an anxiety that any moment the “wrong” manners can no longer be disguised. As Bourdieu and Passeron (1970, p. 146, *apud* Nogueira, 1997) define: “distinctive features of middle-class language, such as erroneous hypercorrection, and the proliferation of signs of grammatical control, are indications, among others, of a relationship with language characterized by an anxious reference to the legitimate norm of academic correctness.” Indeed, Cristiano’s critique of Joakim’s

text is based on this “hypercorrection,” that is, Joakim’s “anxious” relationship with the legitimate norm.

At this point, we return to the field diary observations to identify how the notion of an “oblate,” present at that moment of analysis, can be recuperated here. An oblate is someone who devotes themselves to a culture, but that culture is not their own, resulting in an artificial, rather than “innate,” relationship with it. The hypercorrection of the “beautiful word,” the “decoration,” therefore, sounds exaggerated: it is not comparable to the simplicity of the “adequate” word. Professor Cristiano, in the end, giving a small tragic edge to the situation, interprets Joakim’s hypercorrection in reverse: where one could perceive insecurity, renunciation, and self-deprecation typical of good cultural will, Cristiano sees, on the contrary, arrogance and immodesty; he sees someone who “thinks they are capable of doing things they are not capable of at this moment.”

Thus, for the teacher, when a student does not share the culture expected at the school, it is not, in the first instance, the school as an institution that faces a challenge, but rather, the student who has a “distorted self-image.” After all, for Cristiano, the school “does not have structural problems,” except for these “exceptions.” His statement, therefore, signals how the school institution disguises cultural differences among students as if they were differences in ability. In this way, the school plays a decisive role in legitimizing the exclusion that Joakim experiences on a daily basis.

### ***(c) Interview with the Student: The Struggle Against Exclusion***

In this final subsection regarding the “radiography” of Joakim’s exclusion in his class at Colégio Arcoverde, the focus shifts to another dynamic within the same process. It concerns the dissatisfaction with academic failure, as recorded in semi-structured interviews. Our aim here is to pay attention to the contradictions in the process of determination, as experienced by Joakim. We begin by reproducing an excerpt from a semi-structured interview conducted with the student during classroom observations:

*Researcher: Where did you study at that time?*

*Joakim: At Espanha<sup>5</sup>. It’s one of the best public schools, you know? But then, me and two other guys who were doing well, we got a scholarship to come here.*

*Researcher: And how was it there?*

*Joakim: Ah, it was that thing, unpleasant environment, weak teaching...*

*Researcher: And how is it here?*

*Joakim: Ah, here there’s a lot of pressure, even though it’s not explicit. So, I only manage to sit at the front, but doing that segregates me. Like, I don’t like to talk, I think it’s disrespectful, and I want to pay attention.*

*Researcher: So, who do you talk to the most?*

*Joakim: In the first year, I talked to several people, like, you’ve seen me with Hortênsia and Jessica at recess, right? Recess is sacred, it passes in a second, and I hang out with them more. And I talk a little with the people who were from Espanha. But last year, yeah, I sort of dropped into the other class. Then I kept wandering around.*

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<sup>5</sup> Fictitious name.

*Researcher: Tell me a bit about your family.*

*Joakim: I have a half-brother from my father's side, we're pretty distant. My dad was an alcoholic, he died in 2014, and my brother is much older. But I also have a cousin who graduated with honors in college and another who is a physicist in Holland. My mom is single and I live with her.*

*Researcher: Where do you live?*

*Joakim: In Anhangá<sup>6</sup>, you know?*

*Researcher: That's far, right? How do you get to school?*

*Joakim: I take the bus. I usually have to wake up at 5:30, but today I had to wake up at 4:00 to finish my Religion paper for tomorrow.*

*Researcher: And how do you view grades, the whole evaluation system at school?*

*Joakim: Man, I had to do psychiatric follow-up, but I managed to detach myself: my life was just grades, just school. But the grade... it's a necessary system. It's not effective, it's tedious, but it's what we have. What I have to do is make an effort.*

*Researcher: And if the school were to win an award, what would it be for?*

*Joakim: For attitude. For forming citizens. They care about results, but they give freedom, you know? The debates here don't happen at every school. This talk we had today is already the third one I've had about sexuality since I started last year. On my second day of class, there was already a circle with the class talking about feminism and discussing the relationship with São Jorge<sup>7</sup>. In nine years at the other school, I never debated these things.*

We can initially identify how Joakim's interview, in several points, reiterates the observations in the field diary. He suggests that Colégio Arcoverde is superior, in terms of teaching, structure, and environment, compared to the public school he attended—indicating his good cultural will towards the private school. He also notes that, in terms of relationships, he is not fully integrated with the class, as already pointed out in the observations. Furthermore, he reinforces how external social class conditions disproportionately affect his success within the school (e.g., living far away, taking the bus, family structure). Finally, Joakim confirms his commitment to the school, waking up early to study, adhering to the grading system, and looking up to his cousins who ascended through education as a reference. As discussed in previous subsections, these are structural and symbolic elements — including his “school-based” relationship with culture — that, by bringing him into an “incongruous” relationship with the dominant culture, contribute to his exclusion.

Joakim, for example, when comparing his current school to the public school he attended, acknowledges that there is now great “pressure” that operates in an “implicit” manner. It is because of this “pressure” that he decides to sit at the front of the room, alone. He then recognizes: “But being like this, segregates me.” “Being like this” refers to being someone who sits at the front, alone, paying attention. As we discussed earlier, Joakim is describing precisely the exclusion process that, as an oblate, he experiences, among those who, at a distance and disinterestedly, adopt the culture required by the school. “Being like this,” in a broader sense, is being from a working-class background.

When the young man refers to grades, we see cultural goodwill taking over his school experience, to the point that medical intervention was necessary to mitigate it. Joakim also recorded

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<sup>6</sup> A distant neighborhood in the northern part of the city, typically home to working-class families.

<sup>7</sup> A neighboring school that is public and serves a working-class community — fictitious name.

videos about his school life and shared them with the research team. In the recordings, he talks about his study routine, the times he studies for each exam, and the summaries he needs to make. When discussing the end of a relationship, he worries about how this blow to his “self-confidence” may affect his grades. If it is expected of his peers to question the school, as in the crisis with the chemistry teacher, for him, what matters is “making an effort.”

Moreover, at the end of the interview, we see how Joakim respects in the school precisely the fact that he can go beyond the pragmatism in which he invests so much, as the school offers an education he values for “citizenship.” The example he uses is the lectures on gender and sexuality that take place at the school, complementing the formal curriculum — just as other forms of education occur that go beyond mere preparation for the entrance exam. For Joakim, this distinction is not “given,” “natural,” but a distinctive cultural acquisition that he recognizes and values. We could argue that, due to his class condition, by not experiencing this type of education with dilettantism, he accentuates his working-class position in relation to school culture.

However, we must recognize how this entire process of exclusion does not occur automatically, “from the outside in,” without questions from Joakim. What we can identify is that the student does not simply accept the position of someone who lacks intelligence or the will to succeed academically — whether in relation to sitting at the front, striving for good grades, or valuing the high-quality education beyond the entrance exam. On the contrary, the student reinterprets and negotiates the meanings of these processes. We share below a small but significant excerpt from the field diary, a dialogue between the researcher and Joakim, which indicates the contradictory nature of the experience of exclusion:

*At recess, Joakim takes the opportunity to show me his phone background, a tiger on a raft. “It’s to keep me calm and balanced, like a tiger in the water.”*

The tiger on the raft can be read here as an invitation that Joakim makes to those seeking to understand his experience of class from his own perspective. With this image, Joakim challenges us to think about how social reproduction processes are not only abstract and generalized but are also concrete and experienced relatively autonomously by each social actor. The analyst must be sensitive to perceive these openings and record the lessons the student shares about his most particular experiences of class. The tiger on the raft, therefore, provokes sociological imagination to go beyond macrosociological regularities and anchor the analysis in the relationship between these macro-social trends and the equally valuable “micro” experiences.

A calm and balanced tiger, navigating, is a tiger far removed from the usual depiction. On the contrary, a tiger is expected to be fierce and impulsive, and to avoid water, like a feline. However, the “caricatured” tiger rarely corresponds to the “real” tiger. Biology has already shown how tigers are complex animals, conscious and displaying multiple behaviors depending on the conditions they find themselves in — besides being excellent swimmers. Thus, there is symbolism when Joakim compares himself to a tiger on a raft. Joakim, like the animal, can be strong, tenacious, for his survival. However, according to the circumstances, other behavioral devices need to be activated — such as “calm” and “balance,” which floating on water, outside his comfort zone, demands.

Thus, we do not find a passive recipient of symbolic violence, who inevitably (even with mediations) will live exclusion due to his class predispositions. Joakim is capable of reading situations, adapting to them (even outside his habitat or without the expected class *habitus*), and responding to them for his survival.

In addition to Bourdieu's sociology of practice, at this point, Stuart Hall's (2003) neo-Marxist discussion can be theoretically integrated, to analyze the contradiction between "agency" and "structure" that presents itself. Hall's notion of "determination in the first instance," as outlined in his work (2003), reinforces how there is space for Joakim's re-significations of exclusion tendencies, without disregarding the limits imposed by the social structure. Hall (2003), in this sense, challenges the assumption of a mechanistic Marxism that places economic determination as the final instance — as if ideas inevitably reflected their economic content; rejecting this premise, the author reminds us of the Marxist strengths in identifying the materiality of society's economic conditions. He suggests reflecting on the existence of a determination, but without fixed guarantees of correspondence. In this way, Hall envisions economic determination in the first instance:

Understanding 'determinancy' in terms of setting of limits, the establishment of parameters, the defining of the space of operations, the concrete conditions of existence, the 'givenness' of social practices, rather than in terms of the absolute predictability of particular outcomes, is the only basis of a 'marxism without final guarantees'. It establishes the open horizon of marxist theorizing — determinancy without guaranteed closures. The paradigm of perfectly closed, perfectly predictable, systems of thought is religion or astrology, not science. It would be preferable, from this perspective, to think of the 'materialism' of marxist theory in terms of 'determination by the economic in the first instance', since marxism is surely correct, against all idealisms, to insist that no social practice or set of relations floats free of the determinate effects of the concrete relations in which they are located. However, 'determination in the last instance' has long been the repository of the lost dream or illusion of theoretical certainty. And this has been bought at considerable cost, since certainty stimulates orthodoxy, the frozen rituals and intonation of already witnessed truth, and all the other attributes of a theory that is incapable of fresh insights. (Hall, 2003, p. 274).

Thus, by focusing on the student's case and his simple phone background of a tiger, we can overcome an explanation that saturates the discussion with the unavoidable logic of final determination, as if his class condition condemned him to ideological alienation and a working-class fate. Hall's theory helps us understand how Joakim's class condition decisively impacts his academic trajectory, but it also reminds us of the absence of guarantees regarding how each social subject deals with social and economic pressures and limits. Without romanticizing the strength of determination, Hall's theory reminds us that, despite everything, the future (of Joakim, of the school, and of society) is a site of struggle.

## Final considerations

The aim of this research was to analyze how a young scholarship student, in the second year of high school at an upper-middle-class private school, faces exclusion in his school routine. The justifications for the study were: 1) the possibility of examining family-school relationships from



the student's perspective; and 2) the opportunity to understand exclusion processes in the school through an "ideal-type" case, specifically a student from a working-class family in a privileged school. Additionally, the ethnographic approach aimed to shed light on details that macroscopic sociological perspectives do not seek to capture.

Considering the overall objective of the research, we believe the study successfully provided a radiography of exclusion, not only examining the external aspects but also uncovering the dynamics that occur in the analyzed classroom, contributing to opening up the "black box" of the upper-middle-class private school — an often-neglected locus, sometimes difficult for researchers to access. In doing so, the study carefully captured the multiple "micro" dynamics of classification that occur in this school routine, with decisive implications for the exclusion of Joakim in the classroom environment. In this sense, it is important to highlight the problematic nature of how social inclusion is experienced within the scholarship system of the private school studied, configuring it as an "exclusion" within an ostensibly inclusive project.

Simultaneously, while the school culture imposed itself on Joakim's routine, the research, which aimed to position the student as a protagonist within the school, also recorded how Joakim did not remain passive in relation to his academic fate. By confronting exclusion in his own way — reinterpreting, re-signifying, and reacting to the logic of his exclusion — Joakim helps provide an understanding of how the distinguishing system is concretely and contradictorily experienced by students from working-class families in their school experiences.

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### **RICARDO BOKLIS GOLBSPAN**

PhD in Education, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil; Professor, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil.

### **LUÍS ARMANDO GANDIN**

PhD in Education, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, United States of America; Professor, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Author 1 – Conception and design of the research; construction and processing of data; analysis and interpretation of data; details of their collaboration in preparing the final text.

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*This article was translated by Luís Armando Gandin – E-mail: [luis.gandin@ufrgs.br](mailto:luis.gandin@ufrgs.br). After being designed, it was submitted for validation by the author(s) before publication.*

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