

Between bridges and walls: prescriptive regimes and dilemmas in a vulnerable- territory school*¹

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Abstract

The article focuses on the description and the logic that guide the perception of a professional group (managers and teachers) from a public school located in a vulnerable territory in Belo Horizonte (MG) regarding the public they serve. It specifically analyzes how the territorial dynamics of a favela region in the city of Belo Horizonte (MG), marked by socio-spatial vulnerability, contribute to shaping the school team's perceptions and practices regarding the students and their families. We start from the sociological paradigm that the physical space is a reification of the social space, in which and through which social agents are built. Thus, the study articulates the territory effect - used here as an index that sums up social and economic advantages of social groups due to their location in the social space of the city - with the analyses and interpretations about the relationship between students and families with the school. The data used were gathered through interviews, focus groups, field diaries, and documentary material gathered during research visits to the school. We conclude that the prescriptive regimes and the pedagogical relationship tend to be predominantly grounded on labeling students and families; however, discursive modulations sensitive to a relativization of stigmata can establish cooperation moments and regimes.

Keywords

K-12 education – Labeling – Territory effect – Family-school relationship.

* English version by Viviane Ramos. The authors take full responsibility for the translation of the text, including title of books/articles and the quotations originally published in Portuguese.

1- Data availability: All data that supports the results of this study is published in the article.

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Introduction

A significant part of the studies about school has shown how internal selection mechanisms are co-opted by classification forms based on the distributive arrangement of agents and properties in the social space (Bourdieu, 2013). Therefore, though, in reality, the school devices of performance mediation have not underwent major modifications, sociological studies about the school has shown that the materialization of social justice (Crahay, 2013) demands transformations to be operated in multiple scales, since the broadest ones, which involve decisions about the spatial distributions of economic resources, up to those the smallest ones, related to how teachers regulate behavioral and pedagogical expectations about the teachers.

In the realm of mentalities, the classic study by Pierre Bourdieu and Monique de Saint-Martin (1998) on the categories of professional judgement provided powerful sociological interpretation tools for the social and cognitive operations of the transmutation of social classifications into school classifications. Thus, through the semiological analysis of school records of female students in their first year of higher education, the authors mapped patterns that established a revealing professorial jurisprudence. The compliments and criticisms, numerically translated into grades, were mostly counterparts to the evaluative topography of the social classes:

The professorial judgement is, in fact, supported by a whole system of diffuse criteria, never explicated, standardized, or systematized, which are offered to it by the schooling works and exercises or by the physical person of its author. The handwriting, often explicitly mentioned, when attention is called to its ugliness or puerility, is perceived as a reference to a practical taxonomy of handwriting that is far from being socially neutral and that is organized around oppositions, such as “distinguished” and “intellectual” or “puerile” and “vulgar” (Bourdieu; Saint-Martin, 1998, p. 192).

The excerpt sums up the thesis: the school classification system, as it is intended to do, euphemizes social classification. This “social magic” is mainly anchored in the official nature of school judgment, as well as in the belief in its legitimacy. In the economy of linguistic exchanges, within which many of his works on education must be understood, Bourdieu untangled the bonds that connected the verbal action to the social position of the interlocutors, revealing the most subtle logic of consecration, transgression, and social decay.

Bourdieu and Saint-Martin’s text is used in this article for its ability to unveil mechanisms that produce professorial judgments, as well as the contrast with the reality analyzed here, as the school team, whose practices and discourses we use, does not deny the social but exposes it, and the school issues do not even appear as topics of concern or dilemmas. Instead of euphemism, hyperbole emerges.

This article focuses on the description and interpretation of the logic that guides the concerns of a group of professionals (managers and teachers) from a public school in a vulnerable territory in the city of Belo Horizonte (MG) regarding the public served.

In the testimonies collected, the territory is, *per excellence*, the index that offers the classification criteria of students and their families, as well as working as a sort of repository of elements that could explain attitudes, discourses, and events that the school order must manage, though much farther from their nature and destiny.

To undertake this analysis, we follow a path that seeks to articulate the “territory effect” with the categories present in the works of different authors connected to the Sociological School of Chicago. More specifically, we dialogue with other studies by Richard Sennett (2012) on cooperation, and with the seminal studies by Howard Becker (2009) on labeling and Erving Goffman (2008) on stigma.

These studies are used here because they offer interpretive resources for situations involving norms and values in the spectrum of interpersonal action, so that individuals can adjust their respective action lines through an interpretive process that can take the form of judgment, labels, and stigmata, as well as understanding and cooperation.

This article is structured in three sections, besides this introduction and final remarks. In the first section, we present the characterization of the school and show the research methodological design. In the second section, we explore the spatial dimension as a key variable in the sociology of education, showing how the characteristics of territory guide classification and valuation judgments of students, associating such characteristics with behavioral and learning problems. In the third section, we argue that, though the territory is a fundamental topic for the classification and judgment of the students and their families, the discourses that mobilize it are modulated differently.

Characterization of the school researched and the research methodological aspects

The contact with the School Castro Alves⁴ took place in the scope of research conducted between 2017 and 2019. The team that conducted it analyzed two public schools in the municipal system of Belo Horizonte (MG). Though belonging to the same administrative region, they presented contrasting characteristics in two main dimensions: territory and clientele. The first school, Augusto dos Anjos, has a mixed public, composed of students from poor and middle social strata. Furthermore, it is in a large and wooded street, neighboring an impressive number of high-standard houses.

The school Castro Alves, in turn, is located in a *favelized* area. The region, called “*vila*”⁵ by its residents, is officially classified as a *favela*⁶, as it follows the following criteria:

4- The data that supports this article derives from a research conducted by the *Observatório Sociológico Família- Escola* (OSFE), under the coordination of Professor Maria Alice Nogueira. It was approved by the Research Ethics Committee under number: CAAE 82752417.4.0000.5149. The names of the schools and characters are fictional, respecting the rules of anonymity.

5- “*Vila*” is a term commonly used in Belo Horizonte to designate what in some parts of the country is called *favela*. The *vila* where the school is located is officially mapped in a region that limits a high middle-class neighborhood of Belo Horizonte, and thus the contrasts between both schools were so striking. The data made available by PBH (*Prefeitura de Belo Horizonte*) encompass the neighborhoods in general, not privileging the analysis of more vulnerable areas individually. Therefore, the socioeconomic indicators of the specific territory where the community attended by the School Castro Alves are not available.

6- The term *favela* has been used by IBGE since 2024. For further information, see: <https://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/geral/noticia/2024-01/ibge-volta-usar-o-termo-favela-em-censos-e-pesquisas>



1) predominance of houses with different levels of legal ownership; 2) urbanization outside the current standards and/or occupation restriction (when the houses occupy protected areas or with occupation restrictions). The territorial characteristics are joined by several other vulnerabilities, which will be better explored later, as well as a series of labels and stigmata associated with local violence, the difficulties to access the higher areas of the vila, and poverty. The school works in three shifts, serving students from Grade 1 to 9 in the morning and afternoon shifts, and YAE [Youth and Adult Education] students at night, also offering the *Programa Escola Integrada*⁷. Considering the schools in the region where School Castro Alves is located, the institution has a quite negative reputation (perceived image). Even though the institution is located in a vulnerable territory and has a low performance at IDEB⁸, the unanimity regarding the school's bad reputation was not surprising for the research team as the data show that the school team is, generally, highly engaged (plans activities outside the work hours, puts an effort on receiving the families, etc.)⁹ and that the institution has a very good physical structure (sport courts, library, computer lab, vegetable patch, etc.). Furthermore, at that time, it had several projects (some developed by the schoolteachers, others supported by the Education Municipal Secretary) and an interesting agenda of school trips.

During the research, we noticed that the institution's bad reputation is similar to the stigmatization of the community it serves. It stood out that a large part of the pedagogical team interpreted the sociability and learning problems identified: some members created a type of "sociological comprehensibility" by detailing and interpreting the community's social problems, which many professionals knew firsthand (Coutinho; Cunha; Alcântara, 2021). Hence, they avoided simplistically blaming families and students and, in their practices, we could see an effort to implement tasks that sought approximation to the community (they worked on the weekends in events to receive the community, carefully organized meetings with the families, while making an effort to prepare snacks and decorate the environment).

However, if the explanation of behaviors involved evaluating social problems and, therefore, was not grounded in a classification of individuals as essentially violent, incapable, or negligent, there was, simultaneously, a hermeneutic translation of the problems identified in the territory into the behaviors of students and families. It was exactly in this interpretative operation that the labeling process, which we will try to explain in this text, would occur. For this reason, for the analytical purposes of this article, we use only the data from the School Castro Alves, as a similar dynamic was not observed at the School Augusto dos Anjos.

We conducted interviews with teachers and the school's management team, as well as focal group discussions with teachers, and observations of the institution's everyday life. Furthermore, 13 (thirteen) families of children enrolled at School Castro Alves were interviewed.

7- The *Programa Escola Integrada* is present in 177 elementary and middle schools in the Education Municipal System of Belo Horizonte. The Program extends not only the time but also the learning spaces in which the students have diverse activities that effectively contribute to personal, social, moral, and cultural development". In: <https://prefeitura.pbh.gov.br/educacao/escola-integrada>.

8- In 2017, the year the research started, the school had a IDEB 5 in elementary school and 4.8 and in middle school, values under the target for these phases, which were 5 e 5.8 respectively.

9- About this, see: Coutinho, Cunha; Alcântara (2021).

In this article¹⁰, our analyses are based on data from eight semi-structured interviews (with the principal, coordination, and secretaries) and two focus groups with teachers. The interviews lasted 90 to 100 minutes, and the focus groups resulted in a total of 280 minutes of recorded material. Therefore, the material analyzed comprises approximately 22 hours of recording, which was transcribed into 10 archives. In addition to the interviews, we used records from the researchers' field diaries to complement the considerations here, which provided data on the school's physical structure and routine.

After reviewing the archives to identify the main themes addressed by the teachers and the school's coordination team, we began categorizing the material using the software ATLAS.ti. We chose the Community/Territory axis as a guiding theme for this text from the perspective of managers and teachers and their relationships with students and their families.

In the next section, we briefly explore how the sociology of education has analyzed the relationships between territory and schooling, and then articulate this literature with interpretations of the perceptions of the professional team at School Castro Alves.

School and Territory: School Castro Alves

The spatial dimension establishes a fundamental analytical variable in the sociology of education, as it unequivocally demonstrates the correlation between social and school segregation. About this topic, several studies from Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1989, 1997, 2007) strongly collaborate with the theme, when examining the "correspondence between a given order of agents' coexistence and a given order of properties' coexistence" (Bourdieu, 2013, p. 133). To the author, the physical space corresponds to a relational social structure in which agents and social groups distribute themselves according to the volume and structure of the relationships between the capitals (economic, cultural, and social) they have:

The social space physically materialized (or objectivized) presents itself as distribution, in the physical space, of different goods and services and also of individual agents and groups physically located (as bodies connected to a permanent place: fixed residence or main residence) and endowed of appropriation opportunities of these goods and services, more or less important (depending of their capital and also the physical distance regarding these goods, which also depend on their capital). This double distribution in the space of agents as biological individuals and goods defines the differential value of several regions in the materialized social space (Bourdieu, 2013, p. 136).

Therefore, the individuals and groups occupy positions whose distances and proximities are defined by the volume and composition of corresponding capitals. Thus, the physical space expresses different capabilities of material and symbolic appropriation of rare goods (public or private), defining possibilities for approximation and the distances

10- The first two authors worked directly in the broader research. The third author worked the secondary data in her master's research.



regarding what is desirable and undesirable. The place is not only a setting but also an agent in the production of identities, opportunities, and inequalities.

Since the first decades of the 21st century, we have witnessed a fruitful and renewed movement to investigate the specific weight of the physical-spatial dimension in explaining educational inequalities. Many studies have focused on the social composition of school establishments and the characteristics of the territory where they are located. One of the most consistent results of this literature converges to the finding that families and education professionals seek to escape the establishments located in vulnerable and stigmatized territories, a theme that already appeared in the pioneering and insightful study by Howard Becker (1951/2017) about the process of “horizontal mobility” in the career of teachers in the public schools of Chicago.

Ferreira, Perosa, and Lebaron (2022), in a study on the distribution of social groups and their educational investments in two Brazilian metropolises (São Paulo and Recife), tested the applicability of the social space notion (Bourdieu, 1997) to the Brazilian context. To do so, the researchers used data geometric modeling, i.e., used statistical methods able to consider a complex structure of inter-relations (and the spatial representation of data), as Bourdieu has done when demonstrating how, for instance, the concepts of “social causality”, social class (class of existence conditions), and social space operated. The investigation employed the Principal Component Analysis (PCA) to correlate factors such as income, schooling, infrastructure, and sociodemographic characteristics. The results of the study reveal structural homology in the inequalities among cities, as indicated by a strong correspondence between low schooling, low income, shorter longevity, and a higher concentration of people who self-declare as black, mainly in the most precarious areas. This evidenced the dynamics of “position taking” related to the practices and educational strategies in those two metropolises.

Ribeiro and Koslinski (2009), combining urban and educational sociologies, explore the hypothesis that metropolization impacts the social issue of the reproduction of inequalities in educational opportunities in Brazil. The authors used IDEB (2005) data from urban regions of each of the 438 municipalities included in the study, examining the differences in the school results of the municipalities that integrate metropolitan regions and those outside the metropolitan dynamics, to undertake analyses towards the indication of dimensions that could explain the metropolis-effect on educational opportunities, summarizing the characteristics of the metropolitan contexts that hindered the development of a quality basic education. The sociability crisis is perceived as a central element in this metropolization, characterized by the lack of organization at the family level and the collective life of the neighborhood, which produced unfavorable life conditions for the incorporation of dispositions consonant with the school culture. The research concludes that the metropolis effect, though with different intensities, proved to be relevant to explain the worst performances.

Batista and Carvalho Silva (2013), through research conducted in a region of high vulnerability in the city of São Paulo, sought to answer whether the social vulnerability of the school neighborhood influences its quality. According to the authors, the territory

effect would not be limited to the relationship among the school, the territory, and the population but, among other factors, the unequal distribution of goods and the access to rights in school, which, due to spatial segregation, would let the school isolated as one of the few public equipment in the space and would tend to homogenize the student body:

Summing up: the territory effect is, in fact, a result of accentuated socio-spatial inequalities that characterize the metropolises, the socio-spatial segregation, and the stigmata it creates. It would, thus, be more adequate to say that it is not a territory effect but the effect of socio-spatial inequalities (Batista *et al.*, 2013, p. 23).

Among the results, it was possible to assess that the more vulnerable the region around the school, the more restricted the school opportunities offered by it. According to the authors, in the large metropolises, despite their cultural and economic richness, the inequalities are reified and characterized by the “organization of their space in the form of spatial segregation” (Érnica; Batista, 2012, p. 642), showing the effect of the territory, which is more present in regions with higher economic and educational inequalities. Hence, the territory effect would be more meaningful in realities marked by great socioeconomic and educational inequality, through an intense sociocultural segregation and/or by contexts in which a welfare state able to universalize rights is not consolidated (Érnica; Batista, 2012).

The school institution’s isolation, identified in the research by Batista and Carvalho Silva (2013), is an element that clearly characterizes the School Castro Alves. The lack of appropriate areas for games and sporting practices in the region where it is located turned the institution into a reference public institution for students for these reasons, as the school principal highlighted:

I think that the families, the communities here, are very poor, in extreme need, as they need things. Here it’s all hilly, hill down, hill up. So, the public equipment that offers a flat space to play ball is the school, it’s the school court, is the schoolyard (Principal of the School Castro Alves).

In turn, one of the pedagogical coordinators of the School Castro Alves highlights that many students attend the school frequently but do not see it as a learning space, rather a socialization space, in which they can play, talk, and meet their classmates, mainly in the recess moments, a fundamental event for the sociability of children in the community. The effects of territorial isolation are not simply reduced to the distance from the school when compared to other parts of the city or the few options of leisure and entertainment in the region. The mobility difficulties affect the school’s working schedule, which differs from that of the others in the municipal system of Belo Horizonte. As can be seen through the testimonies, the difficulties in reaching the school by bus made it necessary to change the start and end times of the classes in the afternoon, starting at 1:30 pm and ending at 6pm. Many teachers who worked in other places were late for the beginning of the classes, considering the difficulties arriving and leaving the school, a fact that reinforces the isolated image of the school from the rest of the city.



Contrary to part of the residents of the regions adjacent to the *vilas* attended, who enroll their children in public schools that have a better reputation and higher performance indexes, many families from the School Castro Alves do not have either the informational resources to seek another school, nor the financial conditions to pay for the transport to a more distant institution. All these impossibilities tend to accentuate school segregations, combining variables such as class, race, and territory (Ben-Ayed, 2011).

The condition of a segregated school is described in the excerpt below by the principal of the School Castro Alves, when the interviewee highlights that the institution, among those attending the administrative region to which it belongs, is the destiny of children, jokingly called “saints”:

Principal of School Castro Alves: It's because, like, when the boy is challenging, he's not from the jurisdiction of Augusto dos Anjos [School from the same region but located in a neighborhood surrounded by high-level houses] because normally those are from here. (Laughter). So, they say... “Go to Castro Alves”.

Researcher: So, then, it's not a selection to enter. When one say selection, is it in the process? You receive the student but if they start to have problems, between quotation marks (...). Then they say to the family, what is it? Then it says to the family that he is outside the jurisdiction.

Principal: Yes, then there is this convincing moment, right (...). He is out of jurisdiction.

Researcher: So is this the story that the vice-principal refers to?

Principal: Yeah... (Laughs). “Your jurisdiction is the School Castro Alves”. (Laughs). Then comes the saint (...)

Researcher: Then what?

Principal: Comes the saint (Laughs).

Researcher: So all the difficult ones come to the School Castro Alves, right?

Principal: Yes. Historically this is what happens here, you know, like (...). I think that one of the reasons why the School Castro Alves has this reputation is that, you known, much due to the fact that the School Augusto rejects certain students.

López (2008), dealing with the spatial segregation in Latin America, affirms that the spatial distribution of the population points out “the increase of social inequalities, the reemergence of identities based on the cultural diversity of the region and the deep crisis of social cohesion” (López, 2008, p. 327). This would cause an internal homogenization of territories, along with a progressive decrease in interaction possibilities with other social and cultural means. This segregation would increase the possibilities of stigmatization and labeling of the groups identified with subalternized territories.

The sociological literature summarized and the research data analyzed here attest to the territorial effects on the effective experiences of children and young people's schooling. However, in this article, we do not focus on the examination of contextual elements that explain learning deficits, the causes of school lack of investment, or behavior standards that conflict with the school order. Our aim is to show that the territory characteristics function as a sign of fundamental classification in the explanation discourses about the

behavioral and learning problems identified by the professionals, as well as how they integrate the grammar that justifies the prescriptive regimes (Ball; Maguire; Braun, 2016).

Discursive modulations, prescriptive regimes, and symbolic frontiers in the school-community relationship

In this section, we seek to demonstrate that, though the territory of School Castro Alves is a fundamental topic to classify and judge students and their families, the discourses that mobilize it are modulated differently. The negative reputation of the *vila* collaborates to the stigmatization of the community that attends the school; however, we would like to highlight that there are different ways to deal with the distances between perspectives and lifestyles of the school team and those perceived or attributed to the families.

Regarding this issue, two classic studies with contrasting conclusions offer resources for exploring a theme as fundamental as torturous. The first was conducted by Samuel Stouffer (1949) during the 1940s; the second by Robert Putnam (2007), in the second decade of this century.

Samuel Stouffer, sociology professor associated with the Chicago school, led a team of researchers during and after the Second World War. Through *surveys*, they gathered the opinions of American military members about their experiences in the Army and at war (Stouffer *et al.*, 1950). The research team concluded that the official, with experiences different from those of regular soldiers, did not recognize the values that guided their subordinates' everyday work. Furthermore, as Sennett (2012, p. 15) affirms, Stouffer observed that white soldiers who fought side by side with black soldiers were less prejudiced from a racial viewpoint than white soldiers who did not have the same experience (Sennett, 2012).

Stouffer's research was fundamental for a perspective on the effects of diversity in the social relationships known as the "contact hypothesis", which defends that as we have contact with people who are different from us, we overcome our resistance and initial ignorance and tend to soften our prejudices.

The idea that direct experience with others could benefit cohesion seems present in the discourses of the team from School Castro Alves, particularly those of the management team, which demonstrates an understanding of the communities served. On some occasions, such as in the campaigns to elect the principals and in the visits to students' schools who were frequently absent, the team could learn about the living conditions or witness aspects of family everyday life obliterated in the experiences at the school environment. About the positive effects of a comprehensive posture, a manager states:

This girl that I've found in the *favela*, she would only arrive late. She arrived at seven thirty. The coordination, is, has a role to demand about the schedule, she would arrive here in a bad mood in the class. Then, one day, I called the coordinator: leave Julia [fictional name] like that, it makes things easier for me. If you interrupt this girl here, she will come up here and will have to deal with it...(Laughs). Yeah, you have to read the moment...Then when she arrived, she used a long



skirt and some flip flops that were three sizes bigger than her feet, you now, then I'd already...The school was up here (...). When I heard "son of a b*, damn it..." I knew Julia was arriving. Then I'd open the classroom door. Wherever I was in the room, I'd go to the door. Then, standing at the door: "Good morning, Julia, is everything ok?". Then at the beginning: "maybe for you". And her place was there, close to me, you know...And then, with time, she started to stop by the door and greet. At the end, she would hug and kiss me (Principal of the School Castro Alves).

Several testimonies indicate that some school professionals, aware of students' and families' difficulties, made an effort to welcome them and to ignore potential hostilities. When reporting about another occasion in which she was in the region to visit a student, the principal identified the place as an "extreme hole" due to the characteristics of the space and the precarities she witnessed. These insertions in the residences of their students would have changed her perspective regarding the realities experienced by the students, considering the adversities they are subjected to:

The school serves the *vila*, which is an extreme hole really. The first time I've been there, many years ago [...] It was in the morning, in July, it was cold. And then when I went down and reached her house, I was so impressed with the lack of sun. There was no sunlight. And the cold, I said: guys, I'll never call your attention, because sometimes we call attention with a little less tolerance towards the students because they arrive late at school, you know, at class...I said: "guys, I'll won't do this anymore because waking up at six o'clock in the morning at this hole here..." (Principal of the School Castro Alves).

The coordinator, in turn, when motivated to speak about her experience when talking with the families, highlighting the work they did at the time to build a calendar to individually attend the families, with the intention to give more protagonism to the family-school relationship, states the importance of knowing the "history" of the child to better understand it and improve the pedagogical process:

So, they have a difficult history. Very sad, you know? So, you see here why we cannot think only like: "Ah, these boys here will go nowhere. They won't be anything in life". No; they can! But they have little opportunities. They have reduced opportunities compared to other spaces. Because they don't have, you know, much of the cultural thing, the experience of cinema, strolls, all that jazz. And they suffered many losses. They lost family members, even, for drug trafficking, for the crime. Losing the father, separations, separating from the mother, living alone (Pedagogical coordinator of the School Castro Alves).

If the managers' report matches Stouffer's thesis, many others are closer to the thesis of Robert Putnam (2007), which, in the words of Sennett, defends that "the direct experience of diversity, in fact, makes people move away from these neighborhoods" (Sennett, 2012, p. 16). Putnam debates social solidarity in an analytical terrain of higher complexity. Contact with diversity, particularly in urban contexts, can provoke discomfort and distrust among different social groups. Hence, though diversity has the potential to

enrich social life, it can also generate feelings of insecurity and exclusion, especially when the social and political institutions do not provide adequate support for integration.

At the School Castro Alves, reports of widespread discontent with students' and their families' behavior were persistent. Even among the professionals who recognized the difficulties and vulnerabilities of the communities they attended. Instead of merely judging their attitudes, there is a degree of ambivalence that is unavoidable, as, even among those professionals, there lies the evaluation that it is almost impossible to achieve satisfactory school learning, which is the main school objective.

Within the limits of resentful judgment and condescending conformity, we have observed several ways to address these ambivalences. As previously shown, some professionals insisted more on cooperation, seeking spaces for dialogue and mutual understanding in their relationships with children and their families. Nonetheless, within the same institutions, there were relationships more broadly dominated by what Becker (2009) describes as the dynamics of "labeling". Some elements are essential to the analytical characterization of labeling: the rules that establish the normal and the deviant (regardless of the commitment or not to the act characterized as deviant); and the publicization of the label, be it applied to those who committed the deviant act or those who have characteristics associated with being potentially deviant. Thus,

[...] deviance is not a simple quality, present in some kinds of behavior and absent in others. Rather, it is the product of a process that involves responses of other people to the behavior. The same behavior may be an infraction of the rules at one time and not at another; may be an infraction when committed by one person, but not when committed by another (...). In short, whether a given act is deviant or not depends in part on the nature of the act (that is, whether or not it violates some rule) and in part on what other people do about it (Becker, 2009, p. 28).

Once someone is labeled as "deviant", they can suffer countless social sanctions, labeling is one of them, which places the acts in circumstances that can hinder life routines. The degree of this difficulty, however, is something to be understood in each concrete situation.

In the educational scope, the representations of the ideal student and families shape the expectations of the school team and establish the normative basis of the labeling processes of those individuals or groups that move away (deviate) from the socially legitimate expectations. Hence, isolated behaviors or attitudes are inferred from the labeling indexes, which, in the case of the School Castro Alves, predominantly derive from a homogeneous perspective on the characteristics of the territory's residents. In the research on which we based our analyses, we perceived that the community is often discredited and stigmatized. In several testimonies, it was possible to perceive that the explanations for behavioral, interaction, and learning problems ignored factors related to the school environment or pedagogical aspects, always redirected to family and behavioral questions, often explained in a rather unspecific way and without accounting for the presence of elements of school organization or pedagogical practice.



Expressions such as “vicious cycle” and “problem student” exemplified this interpretative ordering, as we can observe in a teacher’s answer when asked by the researchers about the questions that, in her opinion, would explain a particular student’s situation. According to the teacher, the student was being bullied because she had inadequate hygiene habits. Although the teacher had said that she did not know the student’s family or if her family had been informed about the bullying, she included this case among those that she generically framed as a “problem student”:

(...) I think this is a vicious cycle. The girl gets pregnant at 13 years old, the mother of the girl got pregnant at 13, the girl then gets pregnant at 13 as well, then the great-grandmother is 45 years old (...) you know, it’s unreasonable, in my reality, there’s no logic to that, so, then, it seems that they live what the parents lived and you see that there’s no father presence, or a mother, like, let’s say, in the formal sense we know (...). (Teachers focus group 2 at School Castro Alves).

(...) in the past, I say in the past like in my time, the problem students, I think there were 5 in the class. Now things are inverted: the students that are not problematic are 5 in a class, so there are atypical cases, like in the 9th Grade here, I can remove half of the class, it is a good class, but it’s only the 9th Grade, you know? All the others in this school is this reality, about 5 productive ones and, among these 5, there is a boy that makes a lot of effort and cannot do it because he seems to have a cognitive limitation, now, those who don’t make an effort, the impression I have is that the limitation is much bigger, because there are boys that can’t do it because they can’t (Teachers focus group 2 at School Castro Alves).

The excerpts show that the expectations of the school team are modulated by a specific representation of what a “good student” and a “good family” should be, representations that are culturally and socially situated. It is a paradigm that serves as an implicit normative model, guiding perceptions, evaluations, and school practices. Hence, the judgment about students’ behavior does not derive solely from their actions, but also from the expectations implicit in them.

Even though, as we have argued, there are different discursive modulations about territorial problems, the prescriptive regimes declared by the school are aligned to a micropolitics of behavior (Ball; Maguire; Braun, 2016) based on expectations tuned with the label of the community. We believe that the material below, gathered during a parent-teacher meeting¹¹, demonstrates this argument.

It was a meeting to start the school year and to present the pedagogical team. The school team prepared a careful reception: they ensured the snack to be served was fresh and flavorful, considered the music to be played while families arrived, and arranged the space reserved for the meeting. However, the meeting did not encompass pedagogical or curriculum issues, but only the transmission of information about the school rules, most of which centered on “civility” objectives. Even the possibility of robbery (and how to manage it) is mentioned in the printed material distributed.

11- The information in the heading was changed to preserve the institution’s anonymity.

Table 1- Rules and regulations of School Castro Alves

Municipal School Castro Alves School Address - Belo Horizonte - MG School telephone numbers RULES AND NORMS FOR THE STUDENTS WE HAVE THE RIGHT TO: • Qualified teaches to teach; • Study in a clean and airy room; • Participate and give opinions in class; • High-quality diet; • Drink water and go to the toilet; • Play during recess; WE ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR: • Arrive on time (Morning 7:00 to 11:20 /Afternoon 1:30 to 5:50pm / Night 7:00 to 10:30 pm); • Use a clean uniform (school uniform and/or blue jeans bermuda shorts); • Take care of materials and belongings (in the case of loss or robbery, the school will not be held responsible); • Take care of the classroom and school space (restrooms, water fountains, cafeteria, schoolyard...); • Respect the classmates, teachers, and all school workers; • Copy the content, do the exercises, and tasks proposed; • Do the homework, study for tests and evaluations; • Pay attention the explanations; • After eating, return dishes, glasses, and cutlery at the cafeteria; • Do not waste food; IT IS FORBIDDEN IN THE CLASSROOM: • Litter; • Eat in the classroom; • Leave with no permission; • Cellphones and earphones; • Speakers, mp3 players, and similar devices; • Write on desks or walls; • Walk around the classroom without any need; • Side conversation during teachers' explanations; • Bring toys/games and use them during inappropriate moments in the classrooms; To use swearwords, fight, or discuss with classmates, teachers, and workers. Stub (return to school). I am aware of the information regarding 2019. Student _____ Class _____ Guardian's name _____

Source: Transcription of the document "School Castro Alves," which is part of the research documentary *corpus*. The authors changed the institution's name to preserve anonymity. For the same reason, we omitted its address and telephone numbers.

The short list of "rights", when compared with the protagonism and nature of the "duties", indicates the tensions present in the school environment whose action energies are broadly focused on the attempts to stabilize school sociability. These prescriptive

regimes legitimize discourses that justify school practices based on stigmatization and labeling, leading to evident losses in the pedagogical relationship.

Croizet and Martinot (2003) show in their studies that the stigmata produced through (social and cultural) hierarchy discourses and interactions act as an “invisible break” in school engagement. Thus, though it is possible to recognize an effort by some school professionals to understand students’ vulnerable situations, this understanding, often followed by compassion and pity, is unable to reverse the production of stigma. Thus, in many cases, the same reasons that elicit compassion produce stigmata, which attribute a “value” to students and their families. Considering the power of the school institution, these stigmata sediment the social identity of the individuals evaluated.

The stereotypes are often processed in an almost automatic form, even if the observer does not recognize that the production of judgement is occurring, which does not reduce the deleterious effects for self-esteem and learning, as several studies about the relationship between learning and professorial expectations have been abundantly demonstrated (Bressoux, 2000; Bressoux; Pansu, 2003; Croizet; Martinot, 2003; Croizet; Martinot, 2011).

Croizet and Martinot (2003) have demonstrated, in several studies that the stigmata of social origin and racial belonging engender what they call “stereotype threat”; when students perceive that their groups is associated with low school competence, experience the anxiety of confirming the expectation subjacent to the stigma, which would decrease their actual performance to cognitive and evaluation tasks.

An example of association almost automatic between the corporal *hexis* and the behavioral and cognitive characteristics are expressed in the testimony below, spoken during the focus group, when the teacher states the relationship between the “marginality traits” – which could be called in the Goffmanian literature (Goffman, 2008) as social information – from children in Grade 3 and the co-existence of students with the criminality in the community.

So they often bring to us what they have at home, it can't be any different. And this question of the community they are really a part of. There is a specific Year 3 class, I go to all classes, and this is a class that we leave saying: My God, today I have to go to that class, I have to prepare myself emotionally to go to that Year 3 class”. There are many problems in the same class, this seems to have been carefully chosen. And the boys have these marginality traits. So I say: “My God, what can it be if not that?”. Just by the way they walk, you know? I don't have the experience they have, but the experience they have within the community, counting money, weapons, you know?! We can't even imagine what goes on in there (Teachers focus group 2 at School Castro Alves).

The excerpt above shows elements for two different orders of sociological examination. On the one hand, the teacher affirms the existence of violence in the community, which is confirmed by objective data about the territory.

On the other hand, such a finding is used in a very direct way, with no mediation of institutional and pedagogical organization issues to explain the characteristics of families and children's experiences (“counting money, weapons”) in that Year 3 class. In this and

other excerpts analyzed in this article, we perceived that the “community” is a discursive locus from where it is taken, almost exclusively, the students’ behavioral, civility, and learning problems, and the internal school issues or educational policies are not even part of the reasons presented. The fact that the educational organization (and the time available to teachers) does not favor intensive and differentiated support for students with greater difficulties does not seem to be, in the topography of reasons for behavioral and learning problems, a key element. Here lies an extremely perverse element in the labeling dynamics. The harm this causes to the educational and community work conducted by the school lies in the fact that, considering the social power of the label, it can hardly be thematized as such, and its assumptions and effects questioned. Therefore, the moral entrepreneurs (Becker, 2009) are hardly forced to review their viewpoints, to nuance their rules, to admit their partiality and, sometimes, the arbitrariness of the assumptions on which their views of the world and education are based. On the other hand, all those who carry signs supporting labeling are condemned to conform themselves to the labels in almost all interactive processes they participate in.

Final remarks

As we stated in the first paragraphs of this text, the theme of school justice should be investigated and understood at the multiple scales at which it operates, from the social and educational policies to the intimate space of the pedagogical relationship. Bourdieu and Saint-Martin (1998), in a pioneering work about professorial judgment, demonstrated that the classification forms of professorial jurisprudence of a preparatory course in Paris were the product of a translation of social judgments into school ones. In that research, however, the *signum social* (perceptible reality that refers to another reality that is not present) that is the corporal *hexis* was concealed in school adjectives, which justified the grades. In our study, it is explicit, systematic, and mainly operates to explain behaviors, school experiences, and learning levels. In this sense, the ideal of labeling and stigma, as those used by the authors in the Chicago sociological school, seemed pertinent. We sought to demonstrate that the attitudes of the School Castro Alves team regarding the students and families served are not homogeneous. A greater or smaller disposition for cooperation is at stake, a true challenge for people who work in schools located in vulnerable territories and that frequently experience situations permeated by dilemmas and ambiguities. Some people were more open to this cooperation exercise, seeking to understand the community served, and considering the vulnerabilities and serious material restrictions that many families face.

However, in other cases, the stereotypical judgment tends to guide pedagogical communication, to the extent that it integrates resentment toward the (then interpreted) ungratefulness of students and families who did not recognize the costs of educational work in a vulnerable territory. In all situations described here, the ambiguities and work dilemmas in a territory marked by poverty, violence, and discrimination seem evident.

Sennett (2012) recognizes that cooperation is a fundamental social ability, mainly in contexts of diversity and vulnerability; however, in these contexts, even the moments of cooperation unveil latent tensions. This is because the school did not have the necessary



conditions for efficient educational action for the students who depended most on it for learning and sociability, play, and sporting practices. There is a tension between the ideal of cooperation as a path to building fairer, more equitable relationships and the concrete reality of social divisions and inequalities. The negative representations associated with given territories and social groups create an environment of symbolic threat, in which the territorial belonging can be converted into a mark of inferiority. Thus, understanding and dismantling stigma mechanisms is an essential part of cooperation because it only becomes effective when including the recognition of the symbolic asymmetries that permeate schools.

At the same time, one needs to recognize that the school is tensed by the mission to guarantee equality of opportunities and the inescapability of the effects of a precarious social context. If the families are isolated, so are the educators. Therefore, though they continue to be, to a great extent, moral entrepreneurs, this position does not benefit them. It only offers them the elements to meet the demands (from themselves and others) to explain the “educational failure” and the sociability difficulties, without questioning their own limits and prejudices.

Among the professionals of the School Castro Alves seeking ways for cooperation and a deeper understanding of families, there is a very concrete contradiction between the idea of welcoming and the everyday pressures that reinforce the distinction between “good” and “bad” students, between “present” and “absent families”. This tension reveals the power of social structures that are also present in school practices, in little initiatives to improve sociability, in efforts to improve pedagogical communication, and in the ethical choices produced within everyday relationships. The different attitudes and discursive modulations among school professionals, however, show that, even in vulnerable contexts, the creation of spaces for listening, dialoguing, and mutual recognition is able, with its limits, to redefine meanings and practices.

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