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SCHOOLS AND FAMILIES

School Choice and Formation of Elites in Present-Day Argentina

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Introduction

Examining the relationship between education and elites is a relatively new research area in Argentina. In the sociology of education this issue has become widespread and is linked to an interest in understanding how the more relevant groups in society are comprised (Howard & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2010; Khan, 2011; Kenway, Fahey & Koh, 2013; Maxwell & Aggleton, 2013 and others). Existing literature looks to explain the dynamics of inequality and the prevalence of poverty by focusing on disadvantaged groups; however, studies lack an approach centred on the groups that concentrate conditions of privilege. We agree with Howard and Gaztambide-Fernández (2010, p. 1) when they argue that “the lack of attention to privileged groups is not simply a gap in the existing research but a conceptual link missing in our understanding of inequality”.

The persistence of inequality carries a distinct dimension in present-day Argentina. In contemporary Argentina, a social order restructuring is characterised by two important transformations: a period marked by new capital accumulation and concentration, and changes in integration and exclusion patterns. Such transformations lead to a rise in inequality characterised by high poverty and marginalisation rates. In fact, studies conducted suggest that a widening of the social gap is due to a shift away from a social composition with higher integration and cohesion levels (Svampa, 2005, 2001; Kessler, 2002; among others). This phenomenon, characterised as ‘social fragmentation’, drives our inquiry into how such dynamics manifest in the educational field. I argue that the structural changes modifying the social landscape of our country since the 1990s have also found their expression in the educational arena. Without necessarily establishing a direct relationship between both spheres, I believe that

the educational field has undergone unprecedented transformations. Indeed, several studies reveal connections between social fragmentation phenomena and differentiation processes shaping educational institutions (Tiramonti, 2004; Kessler, 2002, 2014; Veleda, 2012; Tiramonti & Ziegler, 2008).

In Argentina, studies examining poverty conditions and their impact on the educational system emerged to explain these complex processes of impoverishment and social polarisation. In this context devoting resources to examining the education of the most privileged and advantageous groups would seem unjustifiable. However, from my point of view, inquiring into elite schooling is necessary for understanding the complexities of an interdependent society. Tilly (2000) highlights that inequality is a relational process; thus, in order to understand inequality in today's educational system it is fundamental to examine the dynamics of processes that tend to concentrate both advantageous and disadvantageous conditions. This follows Stich and Colyar (2013), who adopted a relational thinking model—as formulated by Bourdieu—and represents an approach that potentially enriches class and elite studies.

This chapter discusses the school selection process in Argentina, a country in which no institutionalised mechanisms of elite school selection exist, as opposed to other countries such as France or Brazil (Tiramonti & Ziegler, 2008; Ziegler & Gessaghi, 2012; Heredia, 2012). This investigation examines the role that school choice plays in guaranteeing socialisation with elite peers and, above all, acquiring the social and cultural capital necessary to informally compete for prestigious and powerful positions. Thus, one objective of this chapter is to understand how individuals who seek to have their children socialised in schools aimed at training youths to occupy the highest social, cultural, and/or economic positions inform themselves. Additionally, examined throughout is the role schooling plays for these groups, the general expectations that families hold concerning school, and finally, their specific expectations regarding future power positions.

This chapter presents results from a study conducted in secondary schools¹ located in Buenos Aires City and the northern part of the Conurbano Bonaerense, a suburban area surrounding Buenos Aires City.² Both are located in Buenos Aires, the largest province in the country with respect to both territory and population. The latter is an urban area with a high concentration of high-income individuals. The Conurbano Bonaerense is densely populated, housing more than 60% of Buenos Aires Province's inhabitants. According to the 2010 national census this region is home to nearly 25% of the national population and 24.6% of the student population. On the other hand, Buenos Aires City is one of the most affluent cities nationally. Although it holds only 7.2% of the total population, this is the city where political, cultural and economic power concentrate. Compared to Buenos Aires City, only 6.4% of the total national student population attends school here.

Furthermore, in Argentina education for the elite is offered primarily at private institutions. If we analyse students attending private schools relative to the total school population, the highest rates of privatisation are found in the most affluent and central conglomerates. During the late 2000s, the proportion of students attending private schools reached 48% in Buenos Aires City, and 30.5% in Buenos Aires Province, as opposed to a national average of 25%. In Buenos Aires Province, privatisation levels were higher in the more affluent municipalities. For example, Vicente López (62%) and San Isidro (58%) are the municipalities in Buenos Aires Province with the highest percentage of Basic Education (1st through 9th grade) students attending private institutions (Veleda, 2012). In addition to geographic concentration, the socio-economic composition of private enrolment leads to increased association with affluent groups. In 2011, 57% of secondary students pertaining to households in the top quintile of the Metropolitan Area (Buenos Aires City and suburban areas) attended private schools.³ Public free secondary education oriented towards elite formation is provided only by a small group of schools that form part of a university.

In summary, in Argentina, elite formation at the secondary educational level tends to be concentrated in the most affluent urban areas, largely in private schools. Access to these schools is not granted initially on the basis of student academic competence. Rather, families' economic possibilities and a legitimisation criteria based on the schools they attended, the surnames of the families, the job positions and a personal interview (with the adults) are deciding factors. In the case of public university affiliated secondary schools oriented towards elite formation, access is granted according to a meritocratic criterion whereby applicants sit a difficult admission exam. These schools, however, do not charge fees.

This chapter integrates results from a qualitative study conducted in three secondary schools aimed at elite formation, located in the City and the Province of Buenos Aires. The investigation includes findings from in-depth interviews with three headmasters, 20 parents and 24 students, along with observations at relevant schools, and an analysis of secondary documents. Demographic information regarding students' families was collected during interviews and in the schools. These data made it possible to analyse school selection and examine this relationship with the groups that constitute the local elite.

The schools define themselves as "traditional" institutions "of academic excellence". The schools examined in this chapter include two private schools: one religious and the other secular. A public school was also selected because of its admission selection procedures and history of educating national leaders. This attests to its character as an institution that has formed elite groups, both political and intellectual. This study examines institutions explicitly designed to train their students to occupy powerful and privileged positions. Privileged positions are those that offer membership in economically, socially, and culturally advantaged groups. This chapter discusses the reasons informing parents' decisions to choose a particular school, examining the objectives motivating those families to make such choices.

Families and Traditions Underpinning School Choice

Scholars examining school choice have incorporated various approaches, in Argentina and in other countries. Some studies driven by policy debates aimed at “free educational choice” have produced literature that challenges the foundations of the alleged free rational choice: among them, important contributions from England (Whitty, Power & Halpin, 1998; Ball, 2003; Crozier et al., 2008), the USA (Weis, Cipollone & Jenkins, 2014), Australia (Windle, 2009), and France (van Zantén, 2009). Several commonalities are present in these studies, including an explanation of the distinct rationalities that converge when actors choose a school, differing interests across social classes and subclasses, and the relationship between making choices with the political, urban, and historical context where they are made. Additionally, these studies debate the assumption that choices take place independently from historical and social conditions, thus it is not the individual manifestation of human attributes that account for the dynamics present in the ‘school market’ sphere.

A number of studies conducted in recent years reveal the active role played by upper-middle- and upper-class groups regarding the school selection process. Jay (2002) in Switzerland, Aguiar (2012) in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, and Waters (2007) and Kenway et al. (2013) examined families in Hong Kong who send their children to Canada and the UK. This list of studies is not exhaustive; it simply illustrates a societal pattern that goes beyond national borders and reveals the influence that the selective behaviour of families has in shaping educational systems.

Braslavsky (1985) was the first researcher to analyse school choice. This research provided an empirical account of socio-economic segregation processes in the educational system, and their connection to educational circuits merging with and becoming based on a student’s social background. Stemming from these initial findings, scholars in the early 2000s introduced a series of studies focused on school choice from a variety of perspectives. Del Cueto (2007), Veleda (2012), Ziegler (2004), and Tiramonti and Ziegler (2008) examined the way in which families play an active role in establishing school segregation by selecting or avoiding certain institutions. Thus, schools contribute to the creation of segregated spaces, and assume a significant role in defining the population they choose to serve.

In the current study, findings from parent interviews suggest that one of the explicit factors influencing them to choose an institution is the guarantee of academic excellence, prestige and a ‘traditional education’. In these cases, education works as a strategy for strengthening newly rising social groups or by groups that already hold advantageous positions. In terms of elite social mobility (Pareto, 1967), education is a strategy used to maintain gained positions or to compete for new, advantageous positions. Restricting access to certain institutions provides a means by which elites are able to maintain or gain access to new power positions. Clearly, it is not only educational institutions that generate these

conditions, but also the complex interaction of families and schools that reinforce the privileged situation held by certain social groups.

This study demonstrates that the socialising effects facilitated by these schools are based on the student immersion in an institutional structure whereby they experience the ideological imperative of the school rather intensively. This finding resonates with other international studies (Kahn, 2011; Goodson, Cookson & Persell, 2000). Students who attend elite schools seek immersion into a milieu that exhibits a degree of 'social similarity' (Weber, 1984). According to Weber, educational and cultural experiences may favour (apart from class position) the creation of a sense of belonging to a *status group*, whereby students only mix with their own kind. Socialisation among similar individuals results from these groups choosing an educational universe equivalent to their family universe. In choosing the most exclusive schools, actors are guaranteed a certain level of homogeneity (Pinçon & Pinçon-Charlot, 2002). Ball (2003) points to a similar phenomenon in England where social enclosure characterised the school choice of middle-high grades schools. Developing Parkin's work (1974), Ball explains that *social closure* is the way in which social collectives maximise benefits by restricting access to resources and opportunities to a limited circle.

A recurring aspect in family choices is the adherence to traditions as a foundation for school selections. It is thus important to focus on the role that traditions play among families that tend to choose elite schools in my study.

According to Giddens (2001), tradition does not have ancient origins. It is a creation of European Modernity dating back 200 years. Its linguistic roots are derived from the Latin term *tradere*, meaning to transmit or hand something down to somebody for safekeeping. Giddens acknowledges that traditions play a relevant role in maintaining social order in all societies; however, he cautions that more conservative philosophies conceive and associate tradition with accumulated wisdom, thus limiting the possibilities for transformation. In such contexts, tradition defines a truth and a framework for action that cannot be challenged.

The supremacy of tradition guarantees that the strategies that were successful in consolidating elites will be maintained. Minor transformations aside, it would seem that embracing the familiar makes sense when attempting to attain or maintain the most advantageous positions. Preserving traditions is a valued asset as it helps maintain the status quo. In deeply uncertain contexts characterised by continual transformation, attachment to the familiar seems to be the path by which most local elites tread. Faced with the perception that rules are vulnerable and institutions are weak in terms of supporting authority vis-à-vis the new generations, families and schools double their stakes by offering a strong socialisation framework, resort to the legacy of traditions, and resist deinstitutionalisation processes (Dubet, 2006).

Nevertheless, we argue that when families discuss tradition they allude to distinct aspects, thus reflecting disparities within these groups. Even though it is not possible to assert emphatically that these educational institutions target

different sections of local elites,⁴ we note that families choosing particular schools exhibit different orientations and group memberships within the social, cultural, and economic space in question. In the case of private schools, there is a mutual reinforcing choice represented by a “two-way selection” mechanism between schools and families (Martínez, Villa & Seoane, 2009). Thus, elite schools exhibit preferences to the families they tend to target, and families restrict their choices to a very limited range of institutions. This dynamic leads to the conclusion that even though all the schools share the same aspiration to form elites, not all elite students could attend the elite school of their choice. Hence, it is the traits that distinguish each institution which clearly map the position it holds within the privileged groups’ formation.

Tradition Based on Religious Education

In the first case a group of parents selected an institution in downtown Buenos Aires City, a private school that typically emphasises both academic and religious education. Tradition is linked to the school’s prestige and history, as well as to the imprint it has left on many generations of students. A noteworthy number of enrolled students are the children and grandchildren of ex-alumni.

According to the parents I interviewed, this school’s teaching system is rigorous, demanding and emphasises discipline. Its rhetoric stresses the importance of Catholic doctrine in education while the ultimate goal is to prepare students to excel in all aspects of university life.

Parental attraction to this institution is based on the desire for an academic education that holds students in a controlled environment where values are upheld. In contrast to families that choose other institutions, it is not the value of knowledge in itself that is prioritised here. Gaining access to knowledge is simply utilitarian, as it is expected to help perform well at the university. Parents are attracted to this institution’s academic nature because it imposes upon students the dedication to study, thus guaranteeing that children experience disciplinary patterns. Parents seek an institution with strong control of their children as a way to secure their socialisation in the patterns valued by these families. The following interview excerpt, for example, encapsulates the priority parents placed on values:

Well, as I have already told you, in my opinion, the most relevant aspect of this school is the education it offers as regards values. It is also important that their values be the same as mine, and well, I believe that my choice of a school is based fundamentally on that.

(father: notary; mother: housewife,
non-university tertiary education complete)

Faced with potential deinstitutionalisation processes, these families expect that a rigorous system will effectively control their children’s behaviour and, essentially,

ingrain a link between studying and discipline in their children. According to parents, the daily routine in this institution is highly demanding and characterised by discipline. Owing to significant transformations in contemporary society, these families attempt to safeguard family and religious traditions and customs in order to guarantee their survival in an evolving world.

The parents in the sample included freelance professionals, business owners, families linked to agricultural activities, as well as to military and church hierarchies. It is common to see children as “heirs” of the economic and professional activities of male parents. The personal success they wish for their children’s future is linked to a university career, which is necessary for occupying senior positions and to maintain the position of their birth family. Most mothers are housewives who have limited their work activities to the home even though many of them have a university education. Typically, these are large families in which mothers play a prominent role in controlling their children’s activities and socialisation networks.

Even though this is a part-time institution,⁵ in contrast to other schools, its academic curriculum requires students to dedicate themselves nearly full time. Mothers of students explicitly mention the fact that they are committed to keeping informed about and accompanying the activities conducted by their children after school hours. Control and socialisation are shared by the school and families; mothers are a key component in the reproduction of certain patterns of socialisation, watching over the maintenance of a controlled environment. Additionally, this group tends to seek a social similarity that will guarantee the socialisation of its members among familiar individuals. The following interview excerpt speaks of the tightly exclusive knitted community that families are connected to:

Interviewer: What purpose serves the school where you send your children, and what purpose do you think it should serve?

Mother: I think it allows them to move in the same environment which they are used to, I don’t know ... to have friends whose parents I know. To give me the possibility of knowing who they are. Within a sector of society, everybody knows everybody. He has got a lot of schoolmates whose dads are friends of mine or whose moms I have known since I was a kid, then you know what circles he frequents.

(father: notary public; mother: housewife,
secondary education complete)

Finally, these families chose the school from a restricted list and they do not consider non-religious schools as options for them. To conclude, it is an environment whose central aspect is a religious disciplinary model and an exclusive condition connected to school selection. This school is not chosen because of their academic level but the moral education that it provides (Gessaghi & Méndez, 2015).

Tradition: Between a Prestige Acquired in the Past and Modernisation

In the second case parents chose a school located in the northern area of the Conurbano Bonaerense. This institution is rooted in the Anglo-Saxon immigrant tradition and is characterised by its excellent bilingual education. Tuition fees are relatively high compared to other Argentine private secondary schools.⁶ Its student body includes groups that are historically linked to the institution, as well as institution “newcomers”. Both parents tend to hold university degrees or certificates, and devote themselves to a range of professional activities (freelance professionals, senior government officers, businesspeople, entertainers).

This is a renowned school whose mission is to provide a high-quality bilingual education with an international orientation. Parents discussed the school’s high academic standards and attributed the challenges the students face to strict international exams regulations. The school’s curriculum includes two mandatory tracks, including the Argentine national curriculum and the International Baccalaureate Diploma.⁷ Parents emphasise that their children are rather privileged given their opportunity to attend this school. They frequently urge their sons and daughters to maximise the experience by “taking advantage of” their passage through the school.

I always tell my children, not only because of the money we pay to send them here, but I really believe that they enjoy the privilege of attending this school, and that’s why I tell them: learn everything, take advantage of everything, because you don’t know if maybe it will serve you in the future. My son is now taking art classes. I love it because, maybe, through these classes he will get to know if he wants to do something related to art ... because when you are 13, 14 years old, you don’t know what your vocation is, so, the more varied the offerings of the school, the more able the kids will be not to make mistakes when choosing.

(mother: lawyer; father: Degree in business administration)

This institution’s educational offering combines an appeal to old traditions with modern updates that allow it to adapt to the demands of internationalised competitive societies. The school mixes age-old traditions with curriculum and organisational changes that are directly linked to new social demands. The institutional adaptations developed are grounded in the desire to provide an education that gives students an opportunity to acquire the abilities necessary to be successful in a globalised society (Resnik, 2008).

Families expect the school to prepare students to not only meet, but also surpass international standards. These families include professionals associated with the most dynamic sectors in the economy, including a significant number of mothers who also work full time in commercial organisations or as independent professionals. Parents in the sample include senior executives of both large and

small corporations, as well as business owners. Parents chose this school during the early stages of their children's lives. Additionally, friends and/or family members also tend to send their children here. An additional characteristic is that almost all families live in close proximity to the school, a situation that leads students to socialise in geographically segregated environments, resulting in reproduction strategies marked by social homogeneity.

These families value the fact that this is a "full-time" school whereby they can delegate all their children's socialisation and control.

This school has one particular trait, a kid that is devoted to school does not have time to do anything else, because the school occupies him seven days a week, that is, they have to devote all their time to school. My daughter plays two sports, she is on the track and field team, she sings in the school chorus, she is involved in community service. She devotes her Saturdays or Sundays to many of these activities.

(father: agronomical engineer; mother: incomplete university education, Political Science)

Such strong sense of belonging facilitates social capital acquisition, and affords status through apparent elitist consumption (i.e., frequenting high-class places and adhering to the group's standards of behaviour (practising exclusive sports, travelling abroad). Studying in this school places these elite groups in a space that need not be won through academic merit or corroborated through demanding entrance examinations.

Unlike the previous group, this school combines the socialisation process present in the most traditional English schools with a modernised curriculum oriented to critical thinking, self-reflection, multiculturalism, self-learning, and flexibility to achieve a "successful" insertion in globalised competitive societies.

Tradition Underpinned by Public Education

In the third case a group of parents chose a public secondary school founded in the 19th century and belonging to a university. Located in Buenos Aires City, this school boasts a long history of educating national leaders and intellectuals. Through a challenging and rigorous admission exam this institution implements a highly selective process that guarantees outstanding intellectual performance. Thus, the school enrolls talented students capable of excelling in spite of a highly demanding curriculum.

Although this is not a bilingual school, its curriculum exhibits several traits shared by the other schools examined. First, it offers a diverse array of extracurricular activities resulting in full-time students. The curriculum is designed to deliver a humanist education combining languages, humanities and sciences and strongly linked to the traditional preparation of intellectual elites.

The interviewed families stress that their choice is based on the value they ascribe to public education. They recognise that their children are privileged to have the possibility to attend this school. This sample included male and female parents that are professionals and employees working in different economic sectors. In contrast to the families included in the two previous groups, these parents' economic and social backgrounds are more varied while the neighbourhoods where families reside are more dispersed relative to the school's location. Given the school's highly selective entrance examination, most families stress that passing the exam implied hard, arduous work for their children.

My daughter attends this school following a suggestion of mine. She has always been very smart, in primary school she stood out as a brilliant student, then, well, she took the entrance examination and finally passed it. That year implied a great effort for all of us, for her and for the rest of the family. She saw her friends enjoying their free time, and she could do nothing but study and study to pass the exams. Being just 12, it was a lot of pressure on her.

(mother: lawyer and sworn translator [French]; father: pharmaceutical sales representative, complete secondary education)

Unlike the students in the previous groups whose entire schooling is in the private sector, this school comprises youths who attended public primary schools, and have now chosen this high school. There is a strong public school rhetoric. One important aspect of this case is that the interviewed parents whose children attended primary public schools have a family educational background with recent access to higher education and more exclusive institutions (i.e., parents had access to secondary and higher education). However, their children are the first generation to attend this particular elite school. Results from questions probing educational paths suggest that the educational level attained by previous generations is lower (as opposed to the other schools included in our sample), and that grandparents held lower status positions such as business, factory, and small enterprise employees. Even though parents maintain that the families associated with the school are basically from the upper-middle and upper classes, the family educational paths indicate the presence of middle-class groups that pursued higher education levels as a means to achieve upward social mobility. Despite this school's explicit intention to form elite groups, its enrolment is more heterogeneous with regard to geographical, social and economic backgrounds than that of its private counterparts. The common trait of all students is their possession of, or their potential to access cultural capital; parents send their students to this school due to its promise to provide the latter.

This school exhibits characteristics that distinguish it from the two previous groups. Parents delegate all aspects of socialisation and education to the school, while the institution restricts families from interfering in any school decisions or

activities. The distance established between families and the school forces these youth to engage in a more independent and self-controlled social life at an earlier stage. In turn, this university school, with a selective academic recruitment system and school socialisation processes, targets students that have already demonstrated an ability to work in a meritocratic milieu.

Conclusions

This study demonstrates the nuances of a school selection process whereby families choose a private or a public school with its own characteristic patterns. The differences between individuals attending private and public schools are similar to the distances between institutions that aim to deliver elite education. Among the families that choose private schools there is a stronger orientation towards homogeneity. Such similarity is achieved through not only spatial but also social segregation. For these families the pursuit of social closure⁸ guarantees similarity and ensures reproduction according to group norms and ideals. The selectivity and social homogeneity present in these schools provides families the ideal environment for socialisation and makes it possible to adjust school principles based on families' idiosyncrasies. These groups choose schools that provide a resource allowing them to consolidate positions of privilege and guarantee membership in certain social groups in which the scholastic options place individuals in social spaces that form part of a 'lifestyle'. Thus, membership in a private educational sphere oriented towards elites is explained by the families' economic possibilities, which in turn grant them access to such places. In this case, the privileged groups do not prioritise their decision to provide their children with quality 'scholastic knowledge' via a meritocratic system.

In contrast, the families that chose a public elite school opted for a school that selects students based on a meritocratic system that demands high academic skills and knowledge. This school receives students from more diverse social backgrounds and gaining access to this prestigious institution represents a crowning moment for upper-middle-class groups competing for educational resources. Subsequently, the social position of a family is enhanced upon a child's entrance. In comparison to the other elite families, in these cases the 'newcomers' deploy *usurpatory strategies* (van Zanten, 2003) in connection with their children's access to schooling. One important finding to highlight is the tendency for upper-middle-class groups to isolate themselves in the more exclusive university schools instead of their traditional inclination to control the public education system.

The end result of these school selection dynamics is the increase of educational fragmentation, particularly in urban areas where institutional variation is on the rise. The opportunity to attend schools with distinct characteristics diversifies families' aspirations while placing elite members in environments that guarantee separation from lower social classes and social interaction with elite peers.

Scholars have examined school choice in several national contexts; however, the school selection process manifests distinctly in Argentina. No formal, institutionalised, elite selection patterns are evident as the institutional mechanisms and career paths leading to such positions tend to be heterogeneous.

This chapter identifies two co-existing possibilities leading to elite education choice in Argentina. The first is a free public high school based on a meritocratic system and administered by a university. The second are expensive private schools based on the possession of economic resources and located in geographically segregated areas, where the youth's education is increasingly dependent upon the wealth and wishes of parents, rather than the ability and efforts ruled by a meritocratic system.

Gessaghi and Méndez (2015, p. 52) argue that “the study of different elite fractions highlights the work performed by educational institutions not only to reproduce elites but also to produce them. The way in which the different schools described interact with the individuals (and families) that attend them, documents the diversity of the legitimisation criteria for access to elite positions in contemporary societies.”

Analysing school choice processes in Argentina reveals what is at stake when opting for an educational institution in a society where access to, and maintenance and legitimation of elite positions are not institutionalised. Thus, families must develop active strategies in order to arrive at and maintain elite positions. Such lack of formality plus the competition to access power and privilege positions explains why families invest in schools according to their preferences, and socio-cultural and economic profiles. They choose schools based on their aspirations, as well as the strategies and opportunities they believe will grant their children advantaged positions. These choices make it possible to acquire social capital and maintain a certain lifestyle while building elite selection mechanisms into a social context where such patterns are vague and less institutionalised and subjects have to combine symbolic and material resources in order to gain access to the elite world.

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Notes

- 1 Secondary schools in Argentina comprise 13- to 17-year-old students.
- 2 This study was conducted at FLACSO Argentina, as part of the Research Project “La nueva configuración de la discriminación educativa en la Argentina”, directed by Guillermina Tiramonti.

- 3 Source: Created by author based on data extracted from the Permanent Household Survey, 2011, INDECs. The fifth quintile is the fifth part of the population that concentrates the highest incomes.
- 4 For such an assertion, it would be necessary to conduct a study tracking schooling processes of individuals who already occupy privileged positions, examining different sections of the elites.
- 5 Students attend school five hours per day.
- 6 When we conducted our fieldwork, monthly tuition fees were approximately US\$1,000.
- 7 The International Baccalaureate is an international educational programme managed by an organisation (IBO) based in Geneva that coordinates educational programmes at the international level.
- 8 Ball (2003) offers a detailed treatment of the social closure that English middle classes tend to seek through their school choices. The author builds on F. Parkin's work to discuss the category of "social closure" more in-depth.

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13

THE ECONOMY OF ELITENESS

Consuming Educational Advantage

Howard Prosser

Haven't we arrived full circle from the myth of the 'rags to riches', the shoeshine boy who turns millionaire just by a stroke of luck combined with rather a lot of gumption, to a 'new and improved' version of the same myth, though with the shoeshining replaced by message kneading? Somewhere along that circular move the promise to level up chances by universal, life-enhancing education has been lost ...

Zygmunt Bauman (2012, pp. 38–39)

Introduction

The growing scholarly interest in elites continually reposes a question: what do we mean by elite? When talking about education, the term elite's elasticity permits a useful confusion. Does elite point to the quality of the education? Or does elite indicate the social position of those receiving the education? In this chapter I unpack some of the issues that lead to such confusion by suggesting that elite schools and their clientele are well served by this indeterminate descriptor. The main reason for such indeterminacy is that what is being spoken of, or not spoken of directly, is class. Within the rhetoric of meritocratic liberalism talking about class differences has become inappropriate (which in itself is a class issue). This improper discussion remains the case when it comes to comparing schools, which is exactly what happens when one school is deemed elite. Calling a school elite is always already a relational or comparative analysis. But a further complication is added when the schools themselves disavow the term elite and replace it with other signifiers like excellence or prestigious (Draelants & Darchy-Koechlin, 2011). Such alternatives assuage the term elite's classed asperities.

But there's little getting away from the fact that high-end institutions that offer globally reputed curricula to the wealthy and powerful are called elite schools.