

DOCUMENTS AND DEBATES

Parental choice, social class and market forces: the consequences of privatization of public services in education

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This paper is part of a research project into parental choice, social class and market forces carried out by a team in Zaragoza (Spain). The main objective was to evaluate parents' choice of school and the consequences this may produce in terms of social exclusion and inequality. Additionally, our aim was to determine whether certain populations, ethnic minorities, economically disadvantaged groups and immigrants, are concentrated in the same schools. The methodology was ethnographic. We studied 13 private and public schools in Zaragoza, in which 40 students carried out research for 5 months, using interviews, observations and document analysis. The interviews were fully transcribed and analysed using a Straussian methodology. We found three micro-markets, varying according to different socio-cultural factors, that share the patterns of an 'old and stable' market. This kind of market does not work strictly under the rules of the marketplace, where there is tough competition between schools. However, its outcomes are similar. This 'old and stable' market is a mechanism of social class reproduction. The middle and upper classes go to private schools, while ethnic minorities, economically disadvantaged groups and immigrants attend the public sector. The parents' expectations, experiences and ideology play a key role in the marketplace, as well as in the several micro-markets. Middle class families have more chances to choose a school, due to greater resources and cultural status. Among several conclusions I emphasize that a market system is not necessary for social inequalities to take place. It will occur when the possibility of choice arises. The middle class are favoured under current circumstances, while the working class are disadvantaged. What are the prospects of disadvantaged classes if a market system is developed, with full freedom of choice being promoted and no compensatory actions carried out? Everybody would have the same rights, but would everyone enjoy the same conditions or possibilities? It is possible to predict that the struggle between a public education monopoly and a market system will produce greater differences between social classes. In fact, these policies could provoke a decline of the public school in Spain.

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Introduction

The choice of school by parents and pupils constitutes a complex subject, currently under debate in Europe. It is linked to the prevailing market forces and particularly to the mechanisms of social class reproduction. In some countries increasing flexibility in public school choice mechanisms has been introduced; in others private schools receive public subsidies; in yet others public schools are placed under greater competition.

This paper is part of a research project into parental choice, social class and market forces carried out by a team of teachers and professors in Zaragoza, Spain. Here I develop a critique of the idea that the key to better schools lies in institutional reform that creates markets where consumers influence schools through their choices, which at the same time are grounded in the belief that markets offer people what they want. I will argue that an open market system is not necessary in order to guarantee the reproduction of social classes. This phenomenon is already present in a system where the possibilities of election are clearly conditioned: the middle class are in a better position to choose and the working class clearly have fewer possibilities.

Market forces in Spanish education

The privatization of public education is one of a range of broader economic, political and cultural processes which have expanded over many other countries of the world. However, I believe we can change this in the future; we can do something for education. The education arena is composed of a complex system of interests, values and positions, therefore educational policies can only be understood if analysed and evaluated in context.

I might start by offering a brief description of the Spanish context, as well as mentioning the main features and the background of current educational policy in Spain. Since the Constitution was adopted in 1978, Spain has been organized as a quasi-federal state with autonomy of educational policies devolved to the regions. The legislative framework (Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport (MECD), 2002) that regulates the Spanish education system comprises five main documents: first, the Spanish Constitution (1978), then four other education acts that develop the principles and rights established in the Constitution, *Ley Orgánica del Derecho a la Educación*, 1985 (*LODE*) (the Organic Act on the Right to Education), *Ley Orgánica de Ordenación General del Sistema Educativo*, 1990 (*LOGSE*) (the Organic Act on the General Organization of the Education System), *Ley Orgánica de la Participación, la Evaluación y el Gobierno de los centros docentes*, 1995 (*LOPEG*) (the Organic Act on the Participation, Evaluation and Administration of Educational Establishments) and, finally, *Ley de Calidad*, 2002 (the Quality Law).

Figure 1 offers a synthesis of the structure of the Spanish education system, according to the above set of laws.

The *LOGSE* divided the education system into two levels: compulsory and non-compulsory education. Compulsory education includes primary education (6–12 years), which is the first compulsory stage of the system, and secondary education

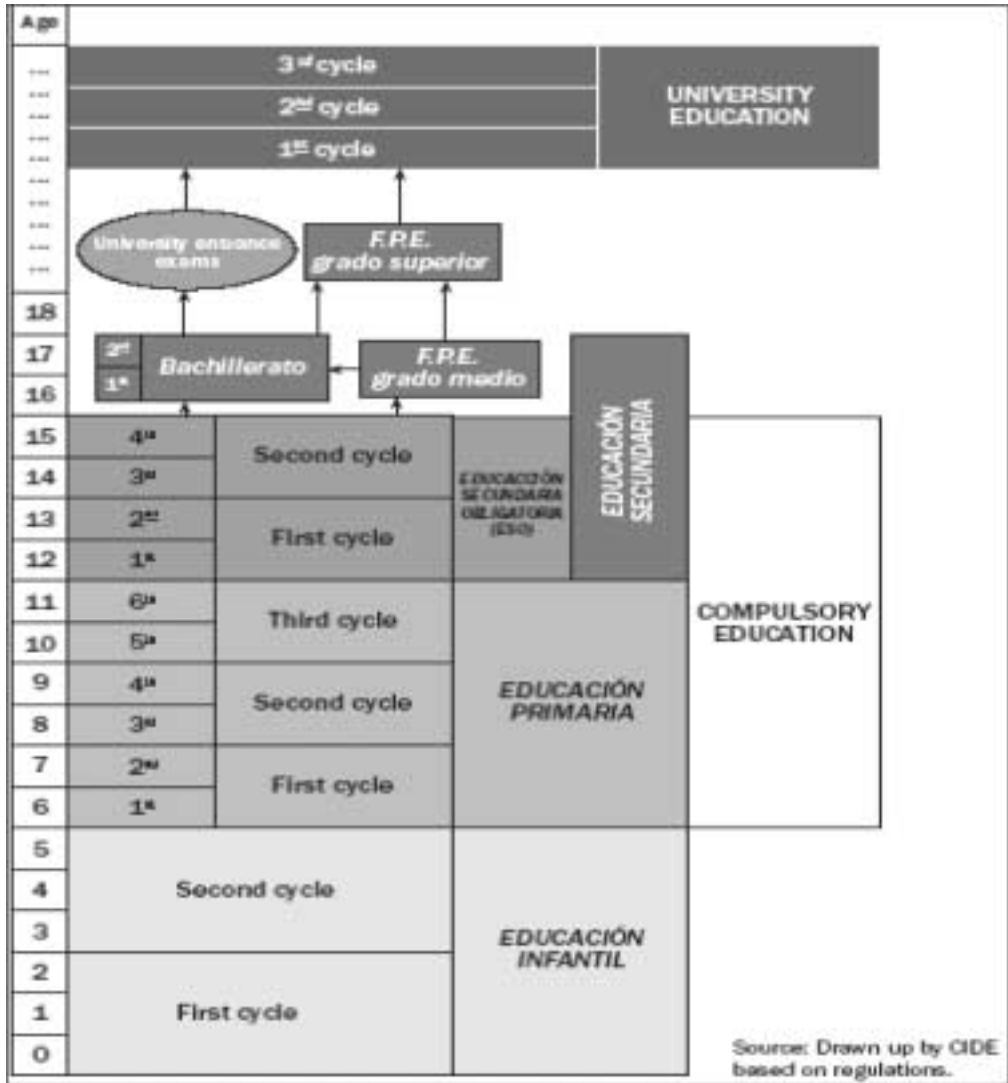


Figure 1. Structure of the Spanish education system (MEC, 2002)

(12–16 years). Compulsory education lasts 10 years and covers the age group from 6 to 16 years old. Non-compulsory education includes infant education, covering up to age 6, the baccalaureate, which is completed in two years, and, finally, intermediate vocational training, advanced vocational training and university education.

There are three forms of education provision in Spain (Figure 2): public, private and subsidized private. All compulsory education, i.e. for children from 6 to 16 years of age, is state funded (78.17% of education expenditure is covered by public funds, i.e. the state and Autonomous Communities, while the remaining 21.83% is from private funds, i.e. families). The subsidized private sector in Spain is very important, not only because of the number of students enrolled in it, but also because it answers

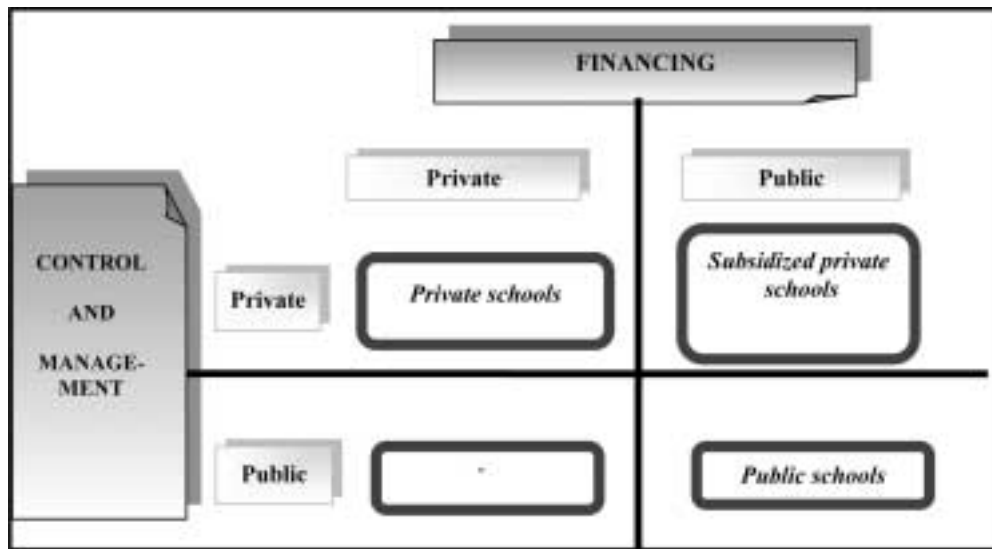


Figure 2. Three networks or forms of education provision in Spain

the educational needs of the social, cultural and economic elite. Most of the social, cultural and economic elite attends private and subsidized private schools. Schools run by religious communities, especially catholic schools, also have a substantial role within the private sector.

Outline of the three networks

Some characteristics of the main forms of education provision in Spain, public schools, private schools and subsidized private schools, are presented below.

Public school. Public schools are characterized by allowing democratic participation in the running and management of the schools. The *Consejos Escolares* (School Councils) are composed of representatives of the school and the community, democratically elected and with power over decisions made at the school level. School Councils are responsible for admission and discipline policies, approving the annual budget, evaluating the schools' development plans, ensuring the maintenance and repair of school buildings and monitoring the administrative and academic activities of the staff.

Schools have very little autonomy regarding financial and other everyday aspects of school life. They are controlled in every fundamental matter, as well as in the minutiae of timetables and general internal functioning. Control is exerted by the state or the Counsellors of the Autonomous Communities. So far, competition among public schools has not been introduced. Parents are free to choose the school they want for their children, this being subject to specific criteria that generally limit the choice; proximity to the school, family income and number of children/siblings attending the same school.

Features of public schools:

- democratic participation;
- little autonomy regarding administration and performance, although this is beginning to change with new market policies;
- state control;
- little competition among schools, although this is beginning to change with the new market policies;
- parents choose the school using three basic criteria of selection;²
- they receive all funding from the state;
- working class and economically disadvantaged students;
- a plural education.

Subsidized private schools (religious and clerical). Private subsidized schools are state funded, therefore, they should be completely free for the pupils. They also allow democratic participation, however in a different fashion to the public schools. They have more autonomy in the financial and administrative aspects of the institution. State control focuses mainly on compliance with basic criteria for admission of pupils, timetables and curriculum. State control then is minimum and flexible. There is no competition among these schools, in part because there is enough demand for every school. This means the issue is not about how to attract students, but about how to select them. Today the number of students that enrol in these types of schools is decreasing. For this reason schools are beginning to develop marketing strategies in order to compete in the market.

In principle parents can choose subsidized private schools in the same way they do for public schools, that is to say, according to criteria of proximity to the school, to the home, family income and the number of siblings attending the specific school, but in fact these criteria are often not met. Just to give an example, one of the most depressed areas in Zaragoza has two schools very near each other. One is private, run by a religious community, and the other is public. The public school receives the poorer part of the population of the area, with 85% of its pupils belonging to under-privileged families, whereas the private school receives students from a nearby area of lower middle class families. Admission policies are the same in both schools, so why do we have this situation? The fact is admission policies are not always applied in practice. Schools use several mechanisms to prevent certain students (mainly immigrants and gypsies) from enrolling, like charging for uniforms, extracurricular activities, catering and parent associations.

Features of subsidized private schools:

- democratic participation (however, less than in public schools);
- autonomy in business and performance;
- little state control;
- competition between schools;
- parents choose the school using three basic criteria of selection;³

- they receive funding from the state and students from the market;
- middle class student population;
- plural and sometimes elitist education.

Private schools (no state subsidy). Private schools without any kind of state subsidy participate in an open market system, which is in fact quite ‘brutal’. These schools are free to plan the model of participation they prefer. They also have total autonomy in terms of financing and management. Competition among these schools is very strong, so each manages all sorts of commercial and marketing strategies, ranging from TV commercials to discounts in stores in the vicinity. Following simple market rules, parents are free to choose the school they like.

Features of private schools:

- freedom to organize the model of participation for the school;
- autonomy regarding finances and performance;
- little state control;
- hard competition between schools;
- parents can choose the school they want, using market parameters;
- they receive funding and students from the market;
- upper class and some middle class students;
- elitist education.

In conclusion, the market system in Spain consists of a combination of school choice and public financing. It is a market system, however, mixed with mechanisms of public intervention. We can point out five characteristics of the market system in Spain: diversity (public and private schools), free choice of school, public financing to both forms of provision (public as well as subsidized private schools), schools ‘sell’ themselves to parents, control and management are decentralized.

The research: objectives, methodology and sample

This project focuses on a ‘local market’, the city of Zaragoza, which is certainly representative of the general Spanish scenario. This city has 140 schools (71 public and 69 private). Among the private schools, 57 are subsidized by the state and 48 are religious. Only 12 schools (all non-religious) receive no funding. All religious schools are subsidized by the state for the years of compulsory education. On the other hand, the structure of the social classes represented in this city, its socio-economic indicators and the proportion of public and private schools mark it as a typical Spanish city.

Objectives

- To study the reasons for parents’ choice of school.
- To analyse the effects of school choice and education markets on the distribution of social groups among schools and thus on patterns of social inequality.
- To explore how markets in education are distributed and what their features are.

Methodology

We adopt ethnography as the methodology. Data were obtained from classroom observation, interviews with different people involved in the process and analysis of the results. We deploy some ideas from Straus & Corbin (1990) for transcribing and analysing data obtained from observation, interviews and analysis of documents. We believe this reality can neither be grasped nor analysed with rigid and closed surveys. On the contrary, in order to understand the way teachers and parents think it is necessary to engage in conversation with them, observe different situations and then analyse the results. We counted on 40 student teachers in their final year of teacher training who had been working in the schools for 5 months. We worked with 13 schools in Zaragoza, a representative sample of different types of schools with different kinds of pupils and backgrounds, in both public and subsidized schools. We interviewed some parents and teachers from these schools, choosing a cross-section from them.

Four micro-markets: reasons for choosing a school

After having analysed the data, we determined four micro-markets with specific variables.

Private schools (upper and middle class)

Private schools in Zaragoza are populated by upper and middle class families with a very high proportion of working housewives. This (micro-)market is mainly located in the downtown area, but also expands towards some suburbs of Zaragoza. The parents' criteria for choosing a school in this sector were as follows.

- Elitism—based mainly on the academic results rather than economic factors, although the two are often linked.
- Discipline and order—in the sense of level of achievement, behaviour and respect for authority.
- Participation controlled by an authority—a participation model based on the family model of tutelage.

This reflects traditional middle class families who organize themselves around the values of a solid and patriarchal structure. Roles are clearly defined and hierarchically assigned in order to guarantee control over the children's socialization, thus making participation in practice a collaboration controlled by the authority.

Public schools (middle class)

Public schools gather mainly upper and lower middle class families, although a significant number of them are working class. There is also a great number of working housewives. The class mix is one of the most interesting elements here. It is worth pointing out that these are the only public schools that have a (free?) transport

system for pupils, since children from very different areas of Zaragoza attend these schools.

I'd like to emphasize the following characteristics of this micro-market.

- Favourable family and social environment—no conflict and no people socially isolated.
- Prestigious school.
- Secular ideology—parents who support private schools but don't want a religious option choose these schools.
- Parents' experience and expectations—parents usually choose the school where they studied themselves and develop high expectations of their children's performance.
- Proximity—most families live nearby, but a considerable number of students come from other neighbourhoods, as they prefer these schools.
- Flexible discipline concerning students' behaviour—tolerance.
- Facilities offered

This type of market shares some elements with the others, while the rest are specific to public schools, for example a tolerant environment, greater pluralism, less academic pressure and ideological influence over content. Nevertheless, we could say that these markets (private and public middle class schools) have more aspects in common than differences, mainly due to the fact that they share a basic social background.

Public schools (working class)

This (micro-)market gathers a large proportion of working class people. Mothers rarely work outside their homes and are mainly housewives. This market consists of what we would call the typical public school, since it serves as a model for the other schools. Their main characteristics are as follows.

- A diverse student population—a mirror of the social context.
- Flexible discipline—less pressure and greater tolerance.
- A non-religious ideology.
- Parents' experience and expectations—parents usually choose the school where they themselves studied and develop high expectations of their children's performance.
- Proximity.
- Facilities offered.

Additionally, in this micro-market the majority of parents send their children to the nearest school, considering no alternatives and making no evaluation of their 'choice' of school.

Public schools (economically distressed populations)

These public schools have a high proportion of families that belong to the underprivileged segment of the population. Within this (micro-)market parents don't really think where they would like to send their child, they just take them to the nearest

school. Their main criterion for choice is proximity. They are not particularly concerned about the educational aspects of schooling. These families fit in the first level of Maslow's motivation scale. Their worries are how to struggle with everyday life and school seems to cover the social role of taking care of children for a fairly extended period of time, helping to keep them from delinquency at a too early age.

(Micro-)Markets as 'socio-cultural spaces'

Three social groups stand out from the analysis of school choice: Non-electors, moderate electors and demanding electors (Pérez-Díaz *et al.*, 2001).

More than 50% of parents do not choose the school and take their children to the nearest public school. Most of them belong to the working class, with some of them from the middle class. They are non-electors.

One-third of parents dedicated some effort to the choice of school, searching for quality rather than for proximity. Most of them belonged to the middle class and took their children to subsidized private schools. They are moderate electors.

The rest of the parents believed that the choice of school was essential and they invested time and effort in finding the best school for their children. These parents took their children to private and subsidized private schools and most of them belonged to the upper and middle classes. They are demanding electors.

It is worth stressing that these micro-markets are not conditioned by geographically defined spaces, but by socio-cultural spaces. The results of choice seem to be clear: the underprivileged (gypsies, emigrants and other socially isolated groups) go to public schools while the middle class use the private sector. Therefore, socio-cultural rather than geographical space is a determinant. This distribution of the population around the different micro-markets is not fixed, but it seems to be becoming stronger, i.e. differences among the groups are intensifying.

Choice of school, public or private?

What we are really discussing in Spain is a public monopoly of education or a free market. From 1939 to 1975 there was a 'private monopoly' of education in Spain, which had the consent of and support from the state because it was a way of spreading and maintaining its ideology. An exacerbating nationalism emphasizing patriotism, identification of the nation with the church, a regard for absolute power as sacred, a hierarchical and authoritarian conception of the social and the political, elitism, aristocracy, militarism, the legitimization of social differences through religion, valuing the traditional bourgeois and the patriarchal family model and valuing unity of the country, all this needed to be taught to new generations. We need to be aware of this 'legacy' in order to better understand the present situation, since several generations were 'educated' under that system.

From 1939 to 1982 the state relied on confessional (Catholic) schools, maintaining only a secondary role in education, basically focusing on areas where private schools did not provide education. Franco especially deployed the Catholic Church to carry

out his policies. Confessional schools thus managed the infrastructure and enjoyed tax exemptions, subsidies and support from the 'national-catholic' state and this provided the sector with a considerable cultural and social influence over Spanish society.

As a consequence, the educational system did not modernize and increasing inequality arose between public and private schools. Public schools were largely attended by children of rural and underprivileged families, while private confessional schools educated the middle and upper classes, most of them in the cities.

Franco's dictatorship left the public and private sectors in a complete imbalance. By 1970 the public schools lacked both quality and infrastructure. This was in the initial stages of the incipient market system, which found the public schools in a weak position. Three important consequences of this need be remarked upon. During the dictatorship of Franco the bases for a total imbalance between public and private schools were established. In 1970 the public schools were deficient in capacity and had a poor infrastructure. As a consequence of this, in the initial stages of the conversion to a market system the public schools were in a disadvantageous position.

The year 1979 brought about a major change: the universalization of education. All the children from 6 to 14 years old were enrolled in schools, while this was extended to children from 4 to 16 years old in 1990. Today everybody goes to school, those who want to and those who don't, the good as well as less good students, the working, middle and upper classes, Spanish and immigrants. While this transformation was taking place state funds became scarce and limited.

Massive enrolment caused the 'quality' of education to drop. This circumstance led to the emergence of a 'culture of school failure' within the educational system; a culture which legitimizes intervention in the educational system in order to solve problems. People started speaking about failing schools, about children studying less and about the attainment levels in language and mathematics falling [the same phenomenon took place in the USA, portrayed in the famous document *A nation at risk* (United States Department of Education, The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983)]. The report preceding the Quality Law in 2002 served to justify this law. Similarly to the USA, this report aimed at favouring middle and upper class students, not those belonging to the lower class.

The underlying assumption of this report was that 'The loss of academic efficiency is very important to economic development', thus only market forces could improve the academic efficiency. Competition between schools, autonomy, lessened state control and free choice of school according to market parameters were to improve education.

The objects of introducing market mechanisms were to minimize the costs of education provision and to increase the possibilities for parental choice. Market forces would generate competition among schools, motivate teachers and reduce school failure. Applying fewer resources and optimizing their use would lead to higher performance.

Market schemes are designed to benefit only a part of the population: the middle and upper classes. The belief that the market system may improve the education of all sectors of the population is based on a wrong assumption; that everybody can choose the school they want for their children and receive state financing. The

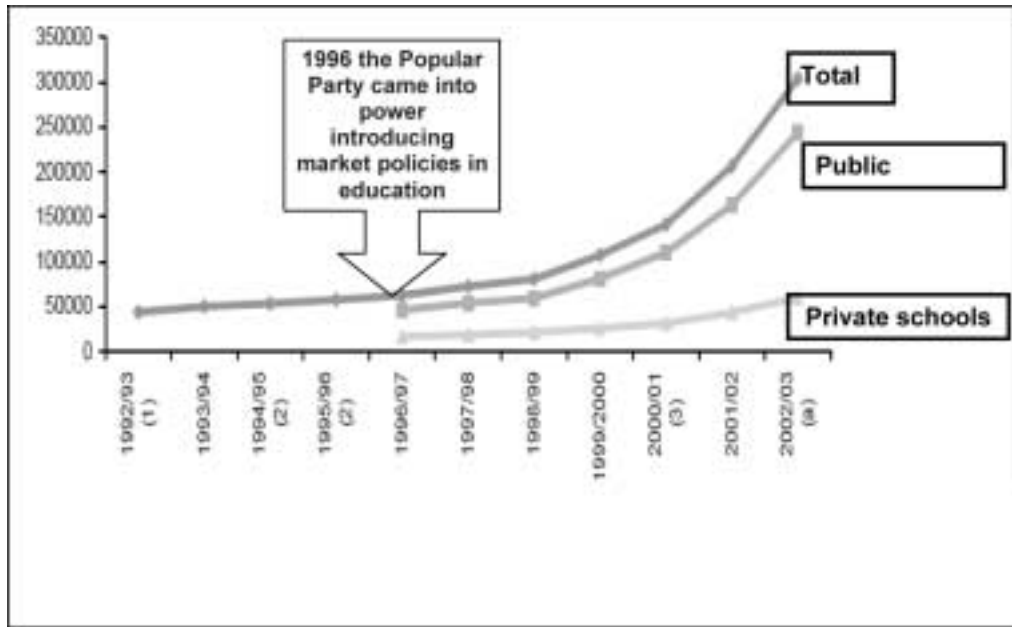


Figure 3. Evolution of immigrant student enrolment in Spain 1992–2003. Source: CIDE

evolution of immigrant student enrolment in Spain is an illustrative example (Figures 3 and 4). It reflects this particular idea of equality based on universal education for everybody and free and equal access to schools with state financing.

Observing this diagram (Figure 5) we see that only two public schools had a higher demand for places than those that were available this academic year (2003–2004) and that these schools belong to the middle class micro-market.

On the other hand, in at least 25 private schools demand for places was higher than availability. While the demand for all places in private schools was 2.970 applicants, in public schools it was 2.329.

The data suggest that private schools in Spain have greater demand than public schools. Nowadays the idea that ‘private education is better than public education’ has become a commonplace. ‘Better’ is linked to discipline, individual attention and level of attainment.

Conclusions and proposals

We have found four (micro-)markets with specific as well as some shared characteristics. The main differentiating feature is the predominant social class. Although these micro-markets are situated in certain physical or geographical areas, above all they are determined by socio-cultural spaces.

The market structure in Zaragoza is an example of the market model that operates in Spain, i.e. an ‘old and stable market’, based not on strict market rules that generate brutal competition among schools, but achieving similar results. True competition

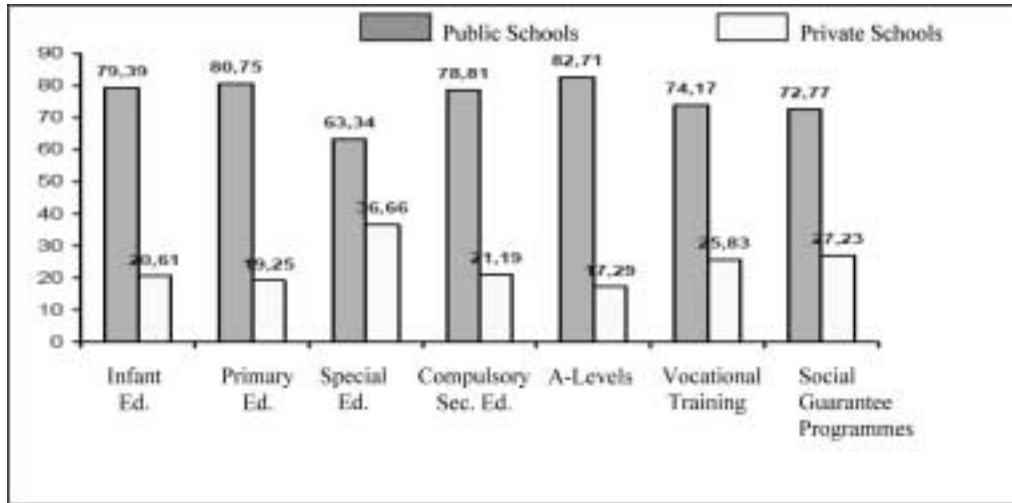


Figure 4. Evolution of immigrant student enrolment in Spain 2003. Source: CIDE

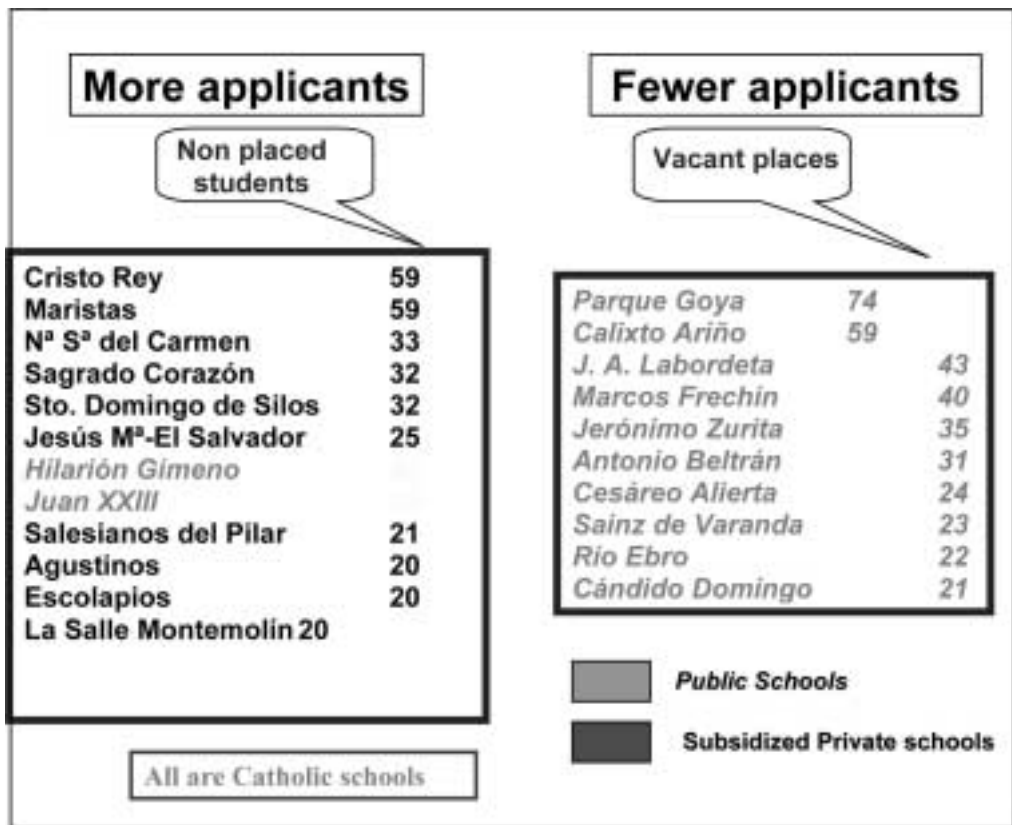


Figure 5. Enrolment in schools, Zaragoza (Spain) 2003–2004

among schools takes place in the private sector. It constitutes a very small market (within compulsory education) because it involves only the middle and upper classes.

The results of this research show that 'the expectations, experiences and ideals of parents influence the choice of school. However, middle class families have more resources as well as greater cultural capital and often do not send their children to the nearest school, but rather to one they consider better, no matter its location. As you go down the social scale you can observe that mobility is less frequent. Many social groups find the complexity of the choice too puzzling.

The 'old and stable' market mirrors social class structures in society. Most middle class children are distributed among middle class private and public schools, leaving the rest of the public schools to the working class and the underprivileged. There have been very few changes in this area in the last few years. Each social class is clearly linked to a different (micro-)market. It seems this scenario can be arrived at without the need to have a completely open market system. The middle class are benefiting from choice. Conversely, the working class are being overridden; often they lack the abilities that are required to benefit from choice.

Three questions arise from this analysis. What would happen if a market system with full freedom of choice and no compensatory action were developed? Everybody would have equal rights, but is the same true regarding conditions and possibilities? Will every school (private and public) start competing from an equal position and under the same circumstances? It is possible to predict that the struggle between a public education monopoly and a market system will produce wider differences between social classes. It may also provoke the final decline of public schooling in Spain, for this sector will only receive the economically disadvantaged segment of the population.

Before I finish I would like to address some final points.

1. There has been an increase in the level of public funding of private education in recent years.
2. Public funding of private schools does not guarantee a free education and open and clear admission policies, because schools use selection mechanisms to prevent immigrants, gypsy and other marginalized students from enrolling.
3. The middle class benefits most from public funding of subsidized private schools.
4. The policy of funding private schools does not eliminate barriers to enrolment in some private schools. Social and cultural factors determine access to these schools.
5. The policy of funding private schools does not broaden choice for every student.
6. The selection of students is not arbitrary. Private schools discriminate against students who do not correspond to a particular social and cultural group or require learning conditions that may be more expensive for the school.

Notes

1. Three basic criteria of selection: (1) proximity of the school; (2) family income; (3) brothers or sisters already at the school

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