

Pereira Maria João, Nata Gil, Teixeira Pedro

CIE(Educational Research and Intervention Centre) - University of Porto, Portugal

### **Accessing higher education: the Portuguese case. The role of secondary schools league tables. (0167)**

Portugal is the only European country in which the numerus clausus system is applied in the access to all public higher education courses, irrespective of their demand. This system applies to the general access regime, which currently accounts for 75%-80% of the students that enter public higher education (MCTES, 2010). Given this context, the marks obtained by students during secondary education become all the more relevant. Therefore, secondary schools league tables – built upon the arithmetic mean of students' marks in a selection of national exams taken at the terminal year of secondary education (cf. Wilson, 2004) – gain accrued importance. Indeed, the position occupied by each school in the league table is seen to work as a proxy for its ability to send students into higher education. That is, the higher the school position in the league table, the higher the global mean of its students' marks in national exams, and therefore the better the chances of them entering higher education.

In Portugal, secondary school league tables have been published since 2001 by a range of newspapers and television channels. Such league tables are produced based on data on students' marks made publicly available by the Ministry of Education. The original justification for publishing league tables was that they would offer an objective way of evaluating the quality of schools. This would enable better informed choices by the families (Afonso, 2009), which in their turn would boost competition between schools, accountability and organizational improvement. Competition between schools is then based on a market model, even if in truth it operates as a quasi-market because educational markets are not independent from State intervention (Santiago *et al*, 2004: 12). In any case, this requires that public schools increasingly operate like private schools and families treat educational choices just like any other private consumption decisions. This has entailed increased competition between public and private schools and, together with the liberal *zeitgeist* of most mass media, defined the framework for the debate about league tables in Portugal over the last decade.

Private schools have been shown to systematically dominate the first twenty positions of the table. This has often been taken as evidence of the advantages of private over public

schooling. The divide between public and private schools has been central to the analyses of league tables carried out both by the mass media and educational researchers. It has become a vital issue in the social construction of representations and debates around education, namely in regard to access to higher education.

In this paper we address secondary school league tables, and in particular the public/private divide in its articulation with educational inequalities (Foster, Gomm and Hammersley, 1996), in two angles. For clarity, we shall call them the “mathematical” and the “sociological” angles:

- a) The mathematical angle: here we deal with the fact that a league table is a representation of reality based on a given statistical formula. Besides considering what such a formula makes visible, one should also look out for what it conceals (Leckie and Goldstein, 2009). First, the formula generates a major, generalized inconsistency: because it amounts to nothing more than adding the marks of the students of a given school in the exams they have undertaken, and then dividing that number by the total number of exams undertaken, it is possible that a given school always shows better results than another in a partial league table (per course) and yet is worse positioned in the global league table. It all depends on the distribution of students and respective marks on the selection of exams considered (Matos *et al*, 2006). This important flaw might call into question the objectivity of the results offered by league tables.

In relation to the public/private divide, league tables make no reference to students’ starting point, be it academic or socio-economic. Their claimed objectivity, grounded on their affirmed technicality and neutrality, enabled them to rise above social and economic differences. Also, league tables ignore the students’ classifications in internal examinations in their own schools throughout the year. These marks also count towards entry into higher education, and studies have shown that the positive differential between internal and national exams classifications is higher in private than in public schools. Here, the common wisdom of “you get what you pay for” acquires a specific meaning that relates to the reproduction of social and educational inequalities.

- b) The sociological angle: here, through interviews with school directors, we address the “cold war” atmosphere between schools that has growingly settled

in since the publication of league tables. School directors acknowledge the limitations of league tables in accounting for a variety of relevant educational aspects. In this sense, they are critical of their merits. Interestingly, however, their discourses also show them being sucked into playing the league tables game: into a competitive dynamics that, depending on the school's position, either forgives or reinforces the limitations of the league tables. In any case, the school is very much its position in the table, and fears have arisen regarding 'cream skimming' processes by schools in order to enhance their league table position (West and Pennel, 2000). Educational processes are eventually reduced to results in examinations. Again, what ultimately matters is the perceived ability of schools to send students into higher education. Families recognize the higher status, and the higher financial rewards, associated with higher education, and as such family choices both feed on and reinforce this situation.

Despite the undisputable large increase in enrollment rates in higher education in Portugal since the mid-eighties, a strong stratification in higher education course choices persists (see also Reay *et al*, 2001; Duru-Bellat, 2009; Dubet, 2010). For example, «20.1% of the polytechnic students came from families with a monthly income lower than €720 (compared to 13.6% of public university students), and only 8% came from families with an income higher than €2,880 (compared to 21.1% of public university students)» (Magalhães *et al*, 2009). League tables, and particularly the discourses associated with them, are part and parcel of this stratification process.

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