

One-dimensional school rankings: a non-neutral device that conceals and naturalises inequalities

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Inequality has long been a central topic in the social sciences. The same holds true with regard to sociological research on education. In this paper we argue that, due to fairly recent developments in the managerialisation and marketisation of the educational field, often associated with the rise of neoliberalism, the topic of inequality gains new dimensions and accrued relevance. Rankings are a device associated with the processes mentioned above. They are instrumental in creating an educational market. Perhaps more importantly, they epitomise the attempt to use market regulation as an instrument for managing public policy. Based on quantitative research on secondary school rankings in Portugal, we provide evidence that school rankings are not as objective and neutral as it is often claimed. In addition, they conceal layers of the process of social construction of inequalities, thereby contributing to their naturalisation. This is particularly visible in the comparison of the differential between the scores obtained by students of private and public schools in their own schools and in national exams. We show that this differential is consistently higher in private (paid) schools than in public (free) schools. In an often fierce context of competition for access to limited places in higher education, these differences can make a difference. Inequalities are thus reinforced through procedural unfairness. Ultimately, we argue that rankings are mostly a device for allocating schools and students in a market, and not so much an analytical tool for explaining educational processes, or even assuring quality.

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Introduction

Despite being relatively recent devices in the assessment of public service performance, rankings have become common feature in the public management scene (for a critical history of the introduction of accountability procedures and devices see, for

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instance, Power 1996). While they did not originate in the educational field, they have established themselves firmly in education management. Indeed, it appears that rankings are 'here to stay' (Brown, 2006, p.33; Dixon, Hood and Jones, 2008, p.253).

While school rankings are a relatively recent device, its links with the marketisation and managerialisation of education are nonetheless well established (Wilson, 2004; Lauder, Brown, Dillabough and Halsey, 2006; Leckie and Goldstein, 2009). A clear sign of this is the fact that rankings are explored in research on a cluster of topics such as globalisation, accountability, the privatisation of education, markets, neoliberalism, competition, and school effectiveness (see, for example, Bagley, Glatter and Woods, 1998; Scheerens, 2000; Amaral, Meek and Larsen, 2003; Ball, 2003; Torres, 2009). Also, the methodological aspects, the fairness and the consequences of the publication of school and university rankings have been widely discussed in different countries (Cowley and Easton, 2000; Wilson, 2004; Afonso, 2009; Leckie and Goldstein, 2009; Power and Frandji, 2010).

In Portugal, the publication of secondary schools rankings began in 2001. Since then, and as rankings are published yearly, a competitive 'cold war' atmosphere has settled in among schools. This competition, most evident between public (free) and private (paid) schools, has, together with the liberal zeitgeist of most mass media, defined the framework for the debate about school league tables, and secondary education in general, in Portugal over the last decade.

Typically, the first 20 places of the ranking are almost exclusively occupied by private schools. This happens despite the fact that, out of the approximately 600 secondary schools in Portugal, nearly 500 are public. This has stirred ample debate in the media, with most commentators arguing that private schools work better, and are more efficient than public schools. Other commentators have focused on the fact that one-dimensional rankings such as the ones published in Portugal, based exclusively on the scores obtained in national exams at the end of the 12th grade, do not enable a satisfactory understanding of the educational process. First and foremost, because those rankings are insensitive to variables such as the geographical location of schools or the socioeconomic status of students. Thus, the debate on school rankings has been mostly structured around the mirroring of merit versus the concealing of socioeconomic conditions. In this, it has proven similar to what goes on elsewhere (Apple, 2004; Brown, 2006), even if it should come as no surprise that the Portuguese debate around school rankings revolves very much around the issue of social inequality. After all, Portugal is one of the most unequal societies of the so-called developed countries, together with the UK, the USA, and Singapore (see Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010). However, the Portuguese debate also contemplates a more particular aspect: the widely spread notion that (some) private schools benefit their students' access to higher education by being rather benevolent in their assessment. To put it bluntly, by giving them better scores than they deserved. While this issue

does not, in itself, interfere with the rankings, it does add gasoline to the fiery debate of merit versus socioeconomic conditions. What's more, as will be seen later, juxtaposing data from the rankings with data from the internal school assessment of students will provide a clear answer to this particular aspect.

In this paper, therefore, we take secondary school rankings as a device for analysing and interpreting the construction of educational inequality. First, rankings are analysed as representations of reality based on a given statistical formula. From this appreciation of a mathematical construction of a documentary social reality (Atkinson and Coffey, 1997), we move on to considering what such formulae both make visible and conceal (Leckie and Goldstein, 2009). By looking into what is being accounted for in rankings, we will argue that the type of rankings that is used in Portugal serves market rather than analytical purposes.

In short, in this paper we will attempt to:

- a) provide clear and simple evidence that school rankings are not as objective and neutral as they often claim. In methodological terms, this will be done by identifying internal inconsistencies in the results offered by the rankings;
- b) show that school rankings conceal layers of the process of the social construction of inequalities, thereby contributing to the naturalisation of those inequalities. This will be achieved by comparing and interpreting the differences between scores in national exams and internal scores in public and private schools.

Access to public higher education in Portugal

In Portugal, access to public higher education is governed by the system of *numerus clausus*. This means that there are limits to enrolment in any given course offered by any given public higher education institution. Therefore, students must compete for admission.

Access to higher education via the general access regime is based on a weighted average of the scores obtained during the last three years of secondary education and the scores obtained in national exams taken at the end of secondary education (12th grade). More specifically, the scores obtained during the last three years of secondary schooling have a weight equal to or above 50%, and the scores obtained in the national exams have a weight equal to or above 35%, depending on course requirements. So, if a given course has 40 places available, it will be the students with the 40 best weighted averages who have applied for that course who will be able to enrol.

The number of places available is put forward by the Universities and polytechnic institutions, but it is subject to approval by the Ministry of Education. Students may apply for a place in a course offered by a public University or polytechnic institution providing they hold a diploma of secondary education or equivalent, and meet all legal requirements, namely having taken national exams in the specific subjects requested by the courses they are applying to. This general access regime

accounts to about 90% of the students in public higher education and includes specific vacancies for people with disabilities, Portuguese emigrants, the military, and people with disabilities (MCTES, 2010). In addition to this general access regime, in 2006 a special access regime was implemented for people over 23 years of age who do not hold a secondary education diploma. While the number of people accessing public higher education via this special regime has been increasing, its amount is still small. There are other special regimes, such as those for athletes, diplomats, and a number of specific professional categories, but their quantitative relevance is almost negligible.

The publication of school rankings in Portugal

Given this context, the results obtained by students during secondary education become crucial for their future. Therefore, rankings of secondary schools – which in Portugal are built exclusively on the scores of students 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 ranking is seen to work as an indicator of its ability to send students into higher education. That is, the higher the school position in the ranking, the higher the global average of its students' results in the national exams, and therefore the better the chances of them gaining access to higher education. It should be pointed out that, in comparison with other European countries, Portugal has a lower than average proportion of students in higher education.

As mentioned above, in Portugal, the publication of secondary school rankings began in 2001. This followed a dispute between a national newspaper (*Público*) and the Ministry of Education regarding the right to information. To cut a long story short, claiming access to information held by public bodies, the newspaper forced – through a legal injunction – the Ministry to release data on the scores obtained by the students in the national exams.

To be sure, this dispute was framed in a wider context. According to Santiago, Correia, Tavares and Pimenta, 2004, the initial justification for the publication of school rankings was the assertion that they would enable an objective evaluation of the quality of schools. It was argued that rankings would increase accountability and improve school autonomy, namely because they would work as a feedback device inducing organisational changes. At the same time, rankings would provide families with relevant and more accurate information, enabling them to make better choices regarding which school their children should attend (Afonso, 2009). On the whole, it was argued that this new indicator would increase the transparency and the quality of educational processes, contributing to academic excellence (see Hope, 2006).

While supporters of the publication of rankings claimed that they provided a transparent, accessible tool, and therefore people from disadvantaged backgrounds could benefit from them, others argued that rankings reinforced inequalities due to

the fact that different groups have different access to information and, most importantly, different resources to take advantage of the information they possess (Ball, Bowe and Gerwitz, 1996; Melo, 2009, p.330). In other words, they argued that middle (and upper) class parents are the most knowledgeable in taking advantage of an increasingly marketised educational arena (Apple, 2004, p.21). The fact that, in Portugal, the top places in the rankings are mostly occupied by (usually rather expensive) private secondary schools points precisely to this problem: even if everyone did have access to the information, still only a few would be able to afford attending such schools. Therefore, as argued by Magalhães and Stoer, the discourse in support of rankings reflects the fact that, in a country that is witness to a simultaneous crisis and consolidation of mass schooling, ‘at the very moment in which the need to materialise an equal opportunities policy becomes clear, a new elitist discourse emerges, which demands the defence of the temple of excellence’ (Magalhães and Stoer, 2003, p.69). In the next section we will explore in greater detail data on the socioeconomic condition of Portuguese students. This will later on be of assistance in understanding the public-private divide that cuts across Portuguese secondary education, including school rankings.

Rankings are presented yearly by a number of newspapers. They tend to use very similar methodologies: they work through the databases made publicly available by the Ministry of Education, and select a number of subjects – usually 8 (for example, Portuguese, Maths, History, Chemistry, Physics, English, Biology and Economics) – in which more exams were undertaken across the country. Then, the scores of each school’s students in those exams are added up and divided by the total number of exams they have undertaken. Schools are then hierarchically located in the ranking, based on their global average score. This methodology is often presented as providing very simple and objective information on the quality of schools.

To be sure, this methodology is blind to issues such as the socioeconomic condition of the students, the geographical location of the schools, pedagogical methods and school management styles, to name just a few. In this sense, it does not provide any analytical insight into the reasons why schools get a given place in a ranking. It does provide, however, very *pragmatic*, market oriented information in the sense that the position occupied by each school in the ranking is, as mentioned above, seen to work as an indicator of its ability to send its students into higher education. This aspect is amplified by the discourses of the media, and it is one aspect of what Nóvoa (2005) calls the increasing drive to examine and publicise what goes on inside the schools. In its turn, this phenomenon is articulated with the current search for legitimating educational systems on the basis of performance indicators that usually translate into easily quantifiable results. It can be argued that, in general, the promotion of accountability policies emphasises products rather than processes and, as such, educational and pedagogical relationships are somewhat devalued at the expense of the focus on individual and institutional competitiveness. To be sure, in

this perspective, the causes of the phenomena – that is, the causes of the results – are not as important as the phenomena itself. Therefore, causes are poorly investigated. Instead, given the usually market-driven ethos of performance-based assessments, the quality of the results, while often left unchecked, is nonetheless attributed to what might be termed the intrinsic competence of school staff and students. Michael Apple sums up nicely the consequences of the neoliberal educational reforms that have been taking place in many countries of the so-called Western world as an ‘odd combination of marketised individualism and control through constant and comparative public assessment. Widely publicised league tables determine one’s relative value in the educational marketplace. Only those schools with rising performance indicators are worthy. And only those students who can ‘make a continual enterprise of themselves’ can keep such schools going in the ‘correct direction’ (Apple 2004, p.21). Therefore, aspects such as the geographical location of schools and the socio-economic status of students and their families, while they may be acknowledged, in practice boil down to very little in standard media discourses and in the public opinion when compared to the abilities and efforts of students and teachers. In other words, individual merit is seen as the supreme, all-encompassing explanatory factor. The danger here is not only the naturalisation of success but, perhaps more seriously, the naturalisation of failure (cf. Flutter and Rudduck, 2004).

An instrument similar to the multidimensional, value-added rankings such as the ones currently used in the UK was applied and given ample dissemination in Portugal only once since the beginning of the publication of school rankings (Grácio, 2002). This happened in 2002, but received so much criticism from commentators in the media that it was never applied again. One can speculate about the reasons why those multidimensional rankings were subjected to far more criticism than one-dimensional rankings based simply on exams results. On the one hand, given the wider range of data needed to elaborate multidimensional rankings, it is easier to find flaws in them: for example, data are not as specific as they should be, data are outdated, etc. On the other hand, they are both harder to produce and harder to interpret. This seems to pose a major problem for the media, who appear unwilling to spend resources in producing more complex products that the general, non-specialist audience will find less helpful and informative. Therefore, despite the fact that, as some argue, ‘there is no criteria to locate a given school in a ranking other than that of the gains achieved in students’ learning’ (Grácio, 2006, p.333), the continued option for one-dimensional rankings based on exams scores indicates that the value of rankings still appears to lay in their ability to work as an indicator for access to higher education. Whether they really are an indicator for that is another story. In any case, if the old axiom stating that if people ‘define situations as real, they are real in their consequences’ (Thomas and Thomas, 1928, p.571) holds true, then it would also be worth checking whether or not the use of such rankings is fair for the people involved.

Accessing higher education in Portugal: data on the socio-economic condition of students

In a recent study, Coutinho (2010) points out that while 25% of Portuguese secondary school students have parents with an intellectual and/or specialised occupation, 40% of them stated that the highest level of education of their parents is primary education. This indicates a significant polarisation of academic qualifications. Also, students in paid private secondary schools belong, in average, to more affluent and academically qualified families than those who attend the free public (State) schools.

With regard to higher education students, Martins, Mauritti and Costa (2005) show that 58% of them come from better equipped social groups in terms of cultural and socioeconomic resources. Here, parents are frequently businessmen and businesswomen, liberal professionals, managers and other technically and academically qualified professionals: indeed, 40% of them hold a professional or technical qualification. In what refers specifically to their academic qualifications, Tavares and her colleagues state that ‘there is an obvious over-representation of students from families with higher education background and an obvious under-representation of students from families with poorer schooling’ (Tavares, Tavares, Justino and Amaral, 2008, p.112). More strikingly and succinctly: ‘... the Portuguese higher education system was far from offering equal opportunities, as a student from a family with higher cultural capital (higher education) was 10 times more likely to enter higher education...’ than a student from the lowest cultural backgrounds’ (Tavares *et al*, 2008, p.120).

To be sure, the family has been a reference point in social and academic discourses about the relationship between education and schools. Its role, function and impact on the type of participation in education have been extensively debated. At least since the 1960’s, when two famous reports – the Coleman Report and the Plowden Report – were produced, there has been consistent attention to the relationship between family and education. To sum up, the most important conclusion of those reports ‘was that the difference in school performance relates more to the social condition of families than with the academic resources available: the first report outlines the importance of the social status of families and the second identifies the language, socialisation, family and parental attitudes as the most influential variables on the results of students’ (Seabra, 2009, p.83).

So, over time the family has been regarded as a source of reference, influence and expectations on and about the educational context. It can then be said that, depending on the training and academic qualifications of parents, students will have different relationships with the school. Such relationships will be crucial to their future educational choices and trajectories. In fact, the literature indicates that the training of parents is clearly related to the performance and achievements of students (Ball *et al*, 1996; Santos, 2006; Pereira, 2010). However, as Seabra points out, the most important thing is not simply the possession of an academic certificate or

diploma, but rather total family stock of education, which is compounded with other structural variables such as socioeconomic status, ethnic background and the internal functioning of the family (2009, p.87).

The fact that parents play a major role in the transmission of representations about the value of school education and certain jobs encourages a reproduction of expectations within the family, even if ‘attempts to reduce choice making to one simple formula or metaphor will only lead to dangerous over-simplification and misrepresentation’ (Ball *et al*, 1996, p.89).

Thus, the influence of parents will not simply entail a *cause* and *effect* relationship between their academic qualifications or socioeconomic status and the school performance of students, because this performance also depends on other factors. Students’ performance is the result of relational dynamics played in a set of influences such as family background, the peer group and the school context. The notion of *good school* held by the families, the ways in which they interpret the school environment, their career expectations, and so on, are certainly diverse and complex when approached at the individual level. However, at a macro level, trends do emerge, and these trends show that ‘choice is very directly and powerfully related with social-class differences [and that] choice emerges as a major new factor in maintaining and indeed reinforcing social-class divisions and inequalities’ (Ball *et al*, 1996, p.110).

We mentioned earlier that the public-private divide cuts across Portuguese secondary education. Indeed, the differences between public and private schools require, and are required by, different audiences. Public and private schools feed on and are fed by the educational background of students, and the expectations of their families. There is, thus, a cycle of influences, a set of different layers (re)producing inequalities rather than equality of opportunities and success.

As they stand, school rankings are part and parcel of this process of emphasising hierarchisation and constituting inequalities. As we mentioned before, this happens due to the impact they have on the choices of families, and because of their pragmatic, market-oriented approach to describing and evaluating the educational process. However, these are not the only reasons. In the next section we will try to show two other reasons why school rankings are part and parcel of this process:

- a) despite their claims to objectivity and neutrality, supposedly grounded on technical quality, rankings have basic flaws. They distort reality even in the very terms they attempt to describe it;
- b) they conceal the fact that, in addition to the socioeconomic and academic advantages usually possessed by students of private schools, the evaluation standards of private schools produce yet another layer of inequality.

Analysing school rankings

In this section we will first address the overall consistency of the rankings produced by the Portuguese *media*. Secondly, using the same official databases through which rankings are elaborated, we will focus on an issue that has generally been absent from mainstream media analysis: specifically, we will explore the existence of systematic differences between the internal scores attributed by public and private schools to their respective students.

As explained previously, access to public higher education via the general access regime requires that students undertake a number of national exams at the end of secondary school. Every year, the Portuguese Ministry of Education releases on its website a database, organised by exam undertaken, that contains, amongst other information, the following:

- whether the school where the exam was taken is public or private;
- the name of the school;
- the location of the school;
- the subject of the exam (eg. Maths, Portuguese, Physics, Geography);
- the sex of the student;
- the age of the student;
- the score obtained by the student in that subject in his/her school at the end of secondary schooling (score range: 0-20);
- the score obtained by the student in that national exam (score range: 0-20);
- the final score in that subject (a result of an average between the two scores mentioned above).

These databases are available since 2002. In this study we deal with the databases from 2002 to 2010, totalling 2.640.054 exams. In the table below we present the total of exams taken each year by students of public and private schools.

Table 1: Number of exams taken each year by students of public and private schools (2002-2010)

Year	Private	% total (private)	Public	% total (public)	Total
2002	35981	11.2	285829	88.8	321810
2003	37173	12.2	267116	87.8	304289
2004	36075	11.7	273344	88.3	309419
2005	38272	12	281432	88	319704
2006	44275	11.4	344975	88.6	389250
2007	29399	11.8	219245	88.2	248644
2008	29125	12.4	204828	87.6	233953
2009	32368	12.4	228047	87.6	260415
2010	30268	12	222302	8	252570
Total	312936	11	2327118	88.1	2640054

Inconsistent pairs

As mentioned above, school rankings in Portugal have been elaborated exclusively by the *media* (namely newspapers) since 2003. The formula used is extremely simple. Basically, newspapers calculate an average of the scores obtained by each school students' in a group of exams, and this average will then determine the position of the school in the ranking¹. However, this is arguably a somewhat flawed formula, resulting in inconsistencies in the ranking position of the schools.

For example, consider the case presented below in table 2. Here you find school A, where 50 students took the History exam (with an average score of 14) and another 50 took Maths (with an average score of 10), and school B, where more students (90) took the Maths exams (with an average score of 11) and only 10 took History (with an average score of 15). Although school B has better scores in both subjects, according to the formula used by the Portuguese media, it would be ranked below school A: indeed, school B would have a global average of 11.4 whereas school A would have an average of 12. The fact is that, once the position of a school in the ranking is given by a simple arithmetic mean, that position is influenced not only by the scores obtained in the exams but also by the distribution of students across those exams.

Table 2: Example of a type A inconsistency

	Average score in Maths	Average score in History	Final average
School A	10 (50 students)	14 (50 students)	12
School B	11 (90 students)	15 (10 students)	11.4

Consequently, one important question relates to the magnitude of these inconsistencies. Are we looking at a few isolated cases, or is the problem more systematic? To tackle this issue, we reproduced the school rankings of one Portuguese newspaper (*Público* – one of the most respected and widely read newspapers and the first to publish rankings), similar in every way to all other rankings produced by other *media*, and, using a PHP² program, identified the number of inconsistent pairs of schools. There are two possible types of inconsistencies (Matos, Lopes, Nunes, and Venâncio, 2006): (i) when a school is assessed in exactly the same subjects as another, but it is negatively affected by the distribution of students across exams, as shown in the example above (we call these *type A* inconsistencies); and (ii) when two schools are assessed by only partially overlapping subjects, and although one of the schools achieves equal or better results in all the subjects in which exams were undertaken at both schools, it is negatively affected by the results in the subjects in which the other school was not assessed (*type B* inconsistencies, as shown in the table below).

Table 3: Example of a type B inconsistency

	Average score in Maths	Average score in Historyin	Average score Portuguese	Final average
School X	10 (25 students)	14 (50 students)	16 (25 students)	13.5
School Y	(no exams undertaken)	14 (50 students)	14 (50 students)	14

The table below summarises the results of the inconsistencies (Types A and B) for each year since rankings were made available by the media.

Table 4: Number of inconsistent pairs of schools

Year	Type a inconsistencies	Type b inconsistencies	Total number of schools in <i>Público</i> newspaper rankings	Total number of schools affected (type b inconsistencies)
2003	0	556	615	21
2004	0	320	608	16
2005	1	579	600	21
2006	1	323	593	16
2007	3	571	608	25
2008	9	234	610	31
2009	2	483	606	25
2010	2	314	608	14
Average	2.25	422.5	606	21.13

Although the absolute number of inconsistencies is quite large when compared to the total number of schools, it is true that those inconsistencies concentrate around a limited number of schools, thus limiting their impact on the overall rankings. Nevertheless, one should also acknowledge that some of these few schools can witness a dramatic boost in their ranking position (for example, jumping more than 200 positions), casting serious doubts on the adequacy of the formula, and on the often self-proclaimed objectiveness and trustworthiness of the(se) rankings.

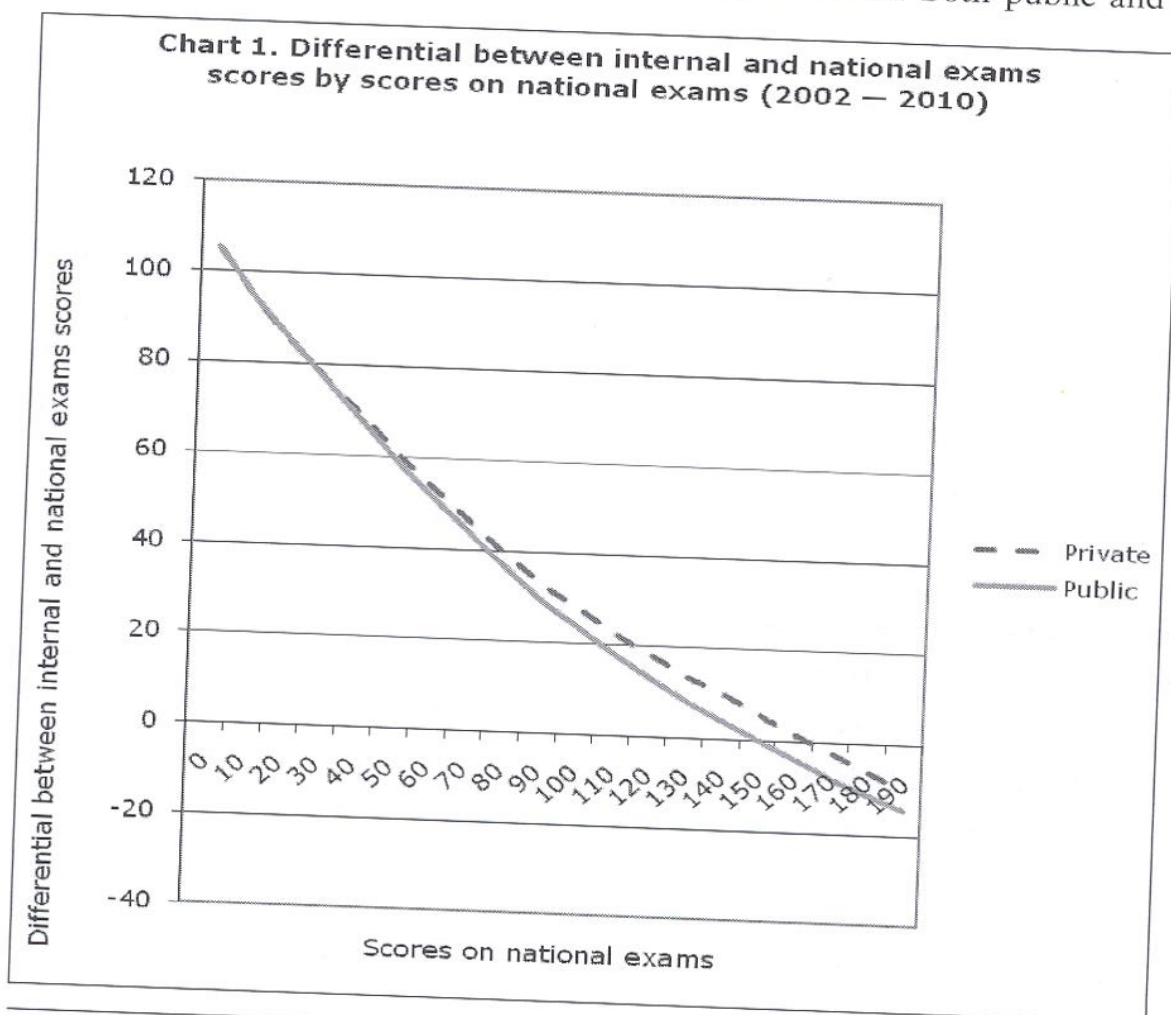
The differences between scores in national exams and internal scores in public and private schools

As mentioned before, the database released every year by the Portuguese Ministry of Education is organised by exams undertaken. In addition to the national exam score, the database contains the score obtained by that same student, in that same subject, in his/her school of origin. Therefore, for each national exam score in a given subject (for instance, History) one knows the student's school score in that same subject (again, History). This enables a comparison between the scores obtained in the

national exam and the scores that were attributed to students in their schools of origin, simply by calculating the difference between the scores obtained in the national exams and the internal scores (ie. the scores attributed by the school to a student in a given subject). To put it plainly, we subtracted the scores of national exams from the internal scores. We then checked for differences between public and private schools.

If one calculates an overall mean for public and private schools taking all exams together (from all available years), one finds that the difference between internal scores and national exams scores in public ($\mu=28.10$) and private schools ($\mu=28.83$) is not significant. Nonetheless, this global average conceals a more complex pattern, as can be seen in table 5. Once the global average is disaggregated by the scores in national exams, it becomes clear that the differential between internal scores and scores in national exams is highest amongst students who had lower scores in the national exams, with virtually no differences there between the public and private schools. However, as scores in national exams increase, a gap between private and public schools emerges, indicating that throughout the period in analysis (2002-2010), private schools have consistently attributed higher internal scores than public schools, particularly to students that don't perform poorly in the national exams.

It should also be noticed that the 0 point in the Y axis indicates a coincidence between the internal and national exams scores. Below this line are students who obtained higher scores in national exams than at school. Both public and private



schools cross the 0 value of the Y axis at a certain point, but the same pattern remains, with students from private schools being favoured (on average) when compared to students from public schools that obtained the same score in national exams. This may, of course, constitute a major advantage when applying for higher education.

Table 5 summarises the data for all the years available in the databases, and it is important to stress that there is not a single year in this analysis where the difference between public and private schools was either absent or inverted. In short, the differences depicted have occurred consistently in all years since data are available, showing clearly that students from private schools are favoured in the scores they obtain in their schools of origin.

Table 5: Differences between internal scores and scores in national exams in public and private schools (disaggregated by national exams' scores)

Scores on national exams	Difference in private schools (2002-2010)	Difference in public schools (2002-2010)	Difference between private and public schools
0 – 9	10.533	10.536	-0.002
10 – 19	9.399	9.414	-0.015
20 – 29	8.497	8.523	-0.025
30 – 39	7.654	7.617	0.037
40 – 49	6.876	6.746	0.130
50 – 59	6.055	5.895	0.161
60 – 69	5.319	5.120	0.200
70 – 79	4.610	4.376	0.234
80 – 89	3.929	3.659	0.270
90 – 99	3.293	2.936	0.358
10.0 – 10.9	2.818	2.399	0.419
11.0 – 11.9	2.275	1.830	0.446
12.0 – 12.9	1.808	1.317	0.491
13.0 – 13.9	1.370	0.831	0.539
14.0 – 14.9	1.003	0.414	0.589
15.0 – 15.9	0.577	0.014	0.563
16.0 – 16.9	0.182	-0.377	0.559
17.0 – 17.9	-0.213	-0.776	0.563
18.0 – 18.9	-0.614	-0.112	0.507
19.0 – 20.0	-0.100	-0.144	0.433

As can be seen in the table above, for those students who achieved grades between 13 and 19 in the national exams, the average difference between internal and exams scores is always higher than 0.5 points in favour of students of private schools. In an often fierce context of competition for access into higher education, these differences can really make a difference. As a rough comparison, a 0.5 points difference can account for a school moving up or down about 30 places in the first decile of the ranking, and about 100 places in the second quartile.

In summary, our data reveals some of the frailties of school rankings, both by showing the inconsistencies that arise due to their simplistic formula, and also through the analysis of aspects that these rankings do not address, compelling us to discuss their alleged political and social neutrality.

Final remarks

When it comes to school rankings, appearances are deceptive. Still, one gets what one pays for. Appearances are deceptive because rankings are often presented as providing an objective, accurate measure of the quality of schools when, in fact, they have basic flaws even in their own terms. Still, one gets what one pays for because the assessment processes of private schools favour their students more than those of public schools, as shown in the comparison of the differences between the scores obtained in national exams and the scores obtained in the schools. A recent study by the Rectoria of the University of Porto points in this direction too: of all the students that were admitted into the University's bachelor and master courses in 2008/2009, 78.4% came from public schools and 21.6% from private schools, while the global distribution of schools across the country is about 90% public and 10% private, with a similar distribution in what regards the total number of exams undertaken (Reitoria da UP, 2011). Of course, there may be other factors involved here and this cannot be, at this stage, presented as evidence of the fact that private school students are favoured. Perhaps more interestingly, the same study shows that after three years in the University of Porto, and taking into consideration the different proportions in which they enter university, students from public schools are more often among the best 10% than those from private schools. This follow-up study apparently contradicts the representation of reality documented by the rankings. Therefore, we can ask: what do rankings really measure?

It is also interesting to note that, while the impression that private schools benefit their students through a more benevolent approach to their assessment is rather commonplace in Portugal, no systematic academic or even journalistic research on the topic had, to the best of our knowledge, been conducted this far. But, if such research has indeed been done before, it is fairly surprising that no clear and effective action has been taken by the authorities. Is this (yet another) indication that, even in the field of education, these are the times in which the so-called *forces of the market* dictate the rules? Of course, we need to remind ourselves that the strength of market forces rests considerably on the State. This paradox of neoliberalism, or perhaps the contradiction between its praxis and its rationalisation, is well documented for the field of education (see, for example, Bonal, 2003; Robertson and Dale, 2003).

It is probably worth reflecting on the fact that, while inequality has always been one the central themes of social science – including sociological research on education (Foster, Gomm and Hammersley, 1996) – it seems to be sparking a growing interest recently. Indeed, a crude analysis of the ISI – Web of Science database shows

that there was a 75% increase between 2004 and 2010 in the number of papers published in the social sciences that have the word 'inequality' in the title. A similar analysis conducted in the EBSCO database reveals a 33% increase (here the search was made with 'inequality' in the title and 'social inequality' as the subject term). Such increases are even more striking in the specific case of education. Indeed, again in the ISI – Web of Science and EBSCO databases, from 2004 to 2010 there were increases of respectively 164% and 119% in the number of papers that have both 'education' and 'inequality' in their title. This suggests a particular and growing sensitivity of educational issues to the topic of inequality. How much of it relates to the current dominant strand of managerialisation and marketisation of education deserves further research.

To be sure, these are very interesting times for the social analyst: how will this tension between the allure of the market and the global, growing sense of embedded unfairness in social and political systems sort itself out?

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Notes

- 1 There are, however, slight variations in the criteria used by different media, and sometimes even by the same media in different years. Specifically, there is the question whether to include all of the subjects in the Ministry's database, or to restrict the analysis to the subjects in which more exams were undertaken, with several newspapers choosing to include only the top eight subjects (this is the case of Público). It should be noted that there is no clear theoretical or methodological argument for selecting eight instead of seven or nine (or any other number for that matter). After the selection of the subjects to consider in the analysis, there is also the decision whether to include all the schools regardless of the number of exams that undertaken there in the selected subjects, or to define a minimum number of exams (Público usually – but not always – only takes into consideration schools in which at least 50 exams were done).
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