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Xavier Bonal[ab] & Aina Tarabini[a]

[a] Department of Sociology, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona,
Barcelona, Spain

[b] Department of Human Geography, Planning and International
Development, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, the
Netherlands
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Being poor at school: exploring conditions of educability in the *favela*

Xavier Bonal[a,b]* and Aina Tarabini[a]

*[a]Department of Sociology, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain;
[b]Department of Human Geography, Planning and International Development,
University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, the Netherlands*

This article explores how different ways of experiencing poverty affect the possibilities of poor children to make the most of their education. The study uses the concept of conditions of educability to reflect how the different dimensions of the experience of poverty facilitate or hinder the success of educational practices and the learning of poor students. In the first part of the article, the concept of conditions of educability is discussed in relation to the notions of capabilities and functionings, and a framework to investigate conditions of educability is presented. The second part of the article is based on the results of a study conducted in Belo Horizonte, the capital of the state of Minas Gerais, Brazil. Through an analysis of interviews conducted with students, families and teachers, the different dimensions of the social experience of the children who inhabit the *favelas* are described. Two cases are presented and discussed as analytical examples of the conditions of educability of poor children. The last section of the article assesses some of the consequences of conditions of educability for the policy debate.

Keywords: poverty; education; capabilities; educability; Brazil

Introduction: on the relationship between education and poverty

If there is one field that has proven to be crucial in the formulation of development policies, it has unquestionably been education. Ever since the theory of human capital conceptualised education as a productive investment with both private and social benefits, the different variations on development theories have made education a core factor in explaining economic growth and the potential reduction in poverty and inequality.

The question, either explicit or implicit, of the relationship between education, poverty and growth in development theories and policies is not whether or not investment in education should be a priority, but how much investment is needed and what kind of education we should invest in. This

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*Corresponding author. Email: xavier.bonal@uab.cat

axiom has characterised approaches to development formulated from the theory of modernisation to the Post-Washington Consensus, and by such divergent bodies as UNESCO, the OECD and the World Bank. This is not restricted to merely discursive or ideological considerations. In recent decades, the World Bank has multiplied its educational loans on a practically constant basis. From 1963 – the year when it launched its loans in the education sector – until today, the World Bank has invested more than $41 billion in credits in the sector (World Bank 2011).

The World Bank figures are consistent with the importance of education within the development agenda, as it is expressed in Education For All or the Millennium Development Goals. However, the political and discursive persistence of the central importance of education for poverty reduction has been simultaneous with a rising body of evidence that has questioned the expected positive effects of investing in education for lowering social inequalities and poverty.

The expansion of education has obviously encouraged the democratisation of access to educational opportunities among social groups that were traditionally excluded from the system; however, this democratisation of opportunities has not succeeded in preventing the persistence of high poverty rates. In Latin America, for instance, titles as explicit as *Cada vez más necesaria, cada vez más insuficiente* (Increasingly necessary, Increasingly insuficient) (Filmus 2001) or expressions such as 'the end of the easy expansion of education' (Tedesco and López 2002, 57, author's translation) illustrate how we have witnessed a rise in educational levels since the 1990s that has no historical precedents, yet we have equally noted the scarce effects of these educational improvements on people's living conditions.

In fact, the global education agenda has been characterised by notable omissions in terms of the relationships between education and poverty; omissions that are fundamental in understanding when, how and why the effects of education on reducing poverty vary. The nature of these omissions is diverse, and range from 'technical' omissions, which often fail to explain the variability in the effects of education on different variables, to more 'political' omissions, which include the implicit assumption derived from a model of analysis that deliberately ignores the diversity of the demand.[1] This article will focus precisely on assessing the diversity of demand, in order to understand the different forms that the relationship between education and poverty can take.

The insistence on the supposed linear relationships between educational supply and demand, or between the supply of degree holders and the demand for jobs, tends to ignore an entire set of factors that produce 'unexpected' effects in the behaviour of the demand. How can we explain a high level of school absenteeism in certain regions of the planet, when the basic education performance rates are always positive? How can we grasp the fact that greater access to education does not always translate into acquisition of the knowledge needed for successful social insertion? These and other

questions are difficult to answer if we choose exclusively technical approaches when analysing the profitability of investments in education. Here less tangible but equally decisive factors come into play in order to understand the behaviour of the demand. Knowing why a poor child learns or not, or why despite having credentials they cannot access the job market, are not answers provided by the classical analysis of the relationships between educational supply and demand offered by the theory of human capital. The cultural milieu, economic need, the social-family situation and the quality of the school are just a few of the factors that the hegemonic agenda of studies on the relationships between education and poverty tends to overlook, and yet these play a decisive role in gaining a deep understanding of the relationship between both phenomena.

The effects of poverty on education: from capabilities to conditions of educability

The omissions mentioned above have been addressed by studies that build on the 'deficit theory' to provide plausible explanations for the academic underperformance of poor and minority groups. Although the 'cultural deprivation' thesis is not as dominant as it was in the 1960s, it is still used to justify the positions of some scholars that tend to blame families and their deficits for poor students' lack of academic success. Payne's work on the culture of poverty is a good example of a biased and classist understanding of the attitudes and aspirations of the poor (Payne 2001), while other scholars have emphasised family values, lack of motivation or low aspirations as the main factors involved in ethnic minority children's underachievement (Trueba 1988; Valencia 1997), or have even justified the overrepresentation of students of colour in special education (Coutinho and Oswald 2000).

In recent years, the capability approach has gained a significant voice as a critique of the linear understanding of the relationship between education and development stemming from human capital theory and as a clear alternative framework to the 'cultural deficit' approach (see, for example, Unterhalter 2003, 2009; Walker 2006; Walker and Unterhalter 2007; McCowan 2011). Although Amartya Sen formulated the concept of capability in the early 1980s (Sen 1982), the development of research into education and capabilities had not expanded until recently. Central to the 'capabilities' approach is the fact that education cannot be reduced to its instrumental value, as human capital theory assumes. As Melanie Walker puts it:

> the value of taking up the capability approach, with its foregrounding of human development, agency, wellbeing and freedom, lies in the way it enables us to ask a different set of questions about education. It offers a compelling and assertive counterweight to dominant neoliberal human capital

> interpretations of education as only for economic productivity and employment, and asks instead about what education enables us to do and to be. (Walker 2006, 164)

The capability approach acknowledges that education has an instrumental value in terms of supporting livelihoods, generating income and reducing human insecurity. Nonetheless, education has a great deal of intrinsic value in its own right, because it makes it possible for people to develop the necessary autonomy to be able to make choices in later life (Tikly and Barrett 2009). Education is also a positional good because its access and possession is limited and provides high status in a context of complex class, gender and race inequalities (Brighouse and Unterhalter 2010).

Thus, education is without doubt a central area in which people's capabilities are constructed, and therefore a key one for observing how people's functionings are either shaped or prevented. Functionings are fundamental for achieving things in life. Just as rights provide a set of entitlements, the development of capabilities provides a set of functionings that allow individuals and groups to attain their freedoms (McCowan 2011, 292).

The capability approach expands the notion of education itself and brings a different perspective to understanding the limitations of educational expansion in reducing poverty. Thus, access to education can be considered a limited asset for poverty reduction because it does not equip the person with the necessary functionings to attain his or her freedoms.

Identifying the most important capabilities is a complex task and has clear consequences when it comes to identifying which educational processes and practices can be considered crucial in developing individuals' capabilities.[2] However, the present article does not focus on the type of capabilities the poor need to ensure their everyday functionings for social inclusion. Rather, it focuses on a previous stage that takes place before the process of capability acquisition. Thus, it aims to reveal the basic and minimum conditions that are necessary for a child to learn at school; and to do this it looks at the material, social or emotional conditions that are necessary to make the process of education itself possible. Somewhat paradoxically, the formation of capabilities is necessary to allow individual's functionings ('beings and doings'), but some fundamental functionings might be considered necessary in order to make the learning process happen (Robeyns 2011). To be well nourished, to be healthy, to be loved by parents or to live in a community free of violence are 'beings and doings' that require basic capabilities. But the capabilities lying behind these functionings are not produced in a vacuum. The conditions in which people receive their education are of course fundamental to understanding the real opportunities people have to properly develop their capabilities and functionings. From this perspective, what we need is a conceptual framework to explore the conditions

and circumstances that facilitate the acquisition of such capabilities and functionings.

The notion of 'conditions of educability' provides such a conceptual framework. López and Tedesco (2002) refer to this concept to answer the question: 'Is it possible to educate in any context?' This aspect is of paramount importance in increasingly complex social settings devastated by poverty. The existence of vital conditions outside the individual's innate abilities is a decisive factor in understanding why educational practices are not successful for certain children. Thus the research question in this case does not attempt to seek a direct response as to whether education serves the development of people's capabilities. Rather, it attempts to explore whether a set of specific living conditions experienced by a child makes education 'happen' in a satisfactory manner. In other words, conditions of educability:

> aim to identify the entire set of resources, aptitudes or predispositions that make it possible for a child or adolescent to successfully attend school at the same time that it encourages us to analyse the social conditions that make it possible for all children and adolescents to access these resources. (López and Tedesco 2002, 7)

Educability is a highly valuable element when analysing the relationships between education and poverty. Of course, minimal material conditions play a role in a minor's condition of educability, but so do having a family atmosphere favourable to learning, a school setting capable of accepting different learning paces and a teaching staff that trust students' educational capacities. In short, social, family and school minimums are needed for the development and potential success of educational practices, since 'under the subsistence line, institutional or pedagogical changes have a very minor impact on students' performance at school' (Tedesco 1998, 1).

Thus, if conditions of educability are key for education to be possible, we must recognise that there are obstacles which prevent the construction of such conditions. That is, in the same way as there are conditions of educability, the material, social and emotional circumstances may produce conditions of 'uneducability'. In conditions of 'uneducability', poor children can hardly learn; not because of any personal attribute, but because of their very harmful everyday life conditions. Of course, conditions of uneducability can be reversed if good policies are effectively implemented. No child is himself or herself uneducable, but can live in certain circumstances that impede him or her from learning at school.

Exploring conditions of educability: the case study

How can we identify which factors prevent a child from learning at school? Researching the conditions of educability requires a qualitative

methodological approach capable of identifying the diverse expressions adopted by poverty, the different ways of experiencing it and the key dimensions which in each case condition children's time in education and their possibilities of success at school. This requires, on the one hand, adopting a perspective on poverty that not only considers its objective and material dimension but also its symbolic and subjective aspects, taking into account its combined and diverse effects on opportunities and practices, and the perceptions of social agents. In her conceptual framework of the capability approach, Ingrid Robeyns (2011) supports the existence of objective and subjective dimensions, which play a role in the process of production of functionings. The same can be applied to conditions of educability. Not only objective but also subjective factors are involved in producing certain dispositions of children at school. Thus, children's views, aspirations and practices are as important as resource-based conditions, like food, health or literacy. It is actually the interplay between structural factors such as resource disposition (food, house, water), structure of opportunities (based on inequalities of race, gender or class) and children's views that can help us to gain a better understanding of why a child can or cannot learn at school. This importance of the subjective dimension is translated into a methodological approach that focuses on individuals as the unit of analysis. As Aguerrondo (1993) states, studies on poverty tend to adopt poor groups as the unit of analysis, showing a highly homogeneous and static conception of poverty, which is hard-pressed to reveal its different manifestations and dimensions. Our analysis focuses directly on poor individuals, and not on either poor people as a group or poverty as an abstract term.

A second methodological implication for exploring conditions of educability is the need to observe all children's living spheres. Conditions of educability can be detected mainly at the school level, but they are rooted in all children's living spheres. Children's experiences are shaped at home, in the community, at school, at work (if relevant). All of them are sources of experience that contribute towards moulding their dispositions towards learning and schooling. Living in a family in which violence is a common practice, being enclosed at home for the majority of the day because of street violence, having absent parents or having a teacher who believes in the child may profoundly mark the child's experience. Therefore, exploring conditions of educability requires identifying which key events and experiences become crucial to understand why children's dispositions are shaped in the way they are.

Figure 1 summarises the conceptual framework to explore conditions of educability. Both objective and subjective dimensions of children's everyday lives are involved in defining conditions of educability. This interaction has specific manifestations of conditions of educability, which can be highly diverse and may configure different 'scenarios' of conditions of educability. 'Scenarios' cannot be reduced to the effect of a single variable, and nor
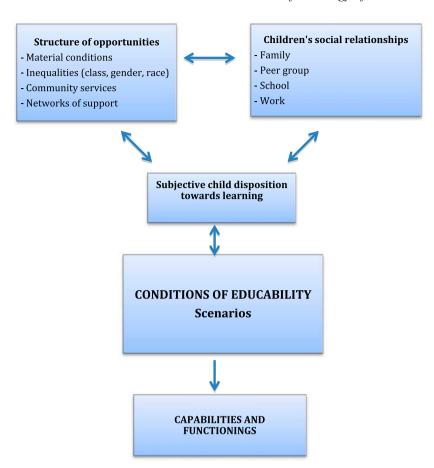
Figure 1.   Conditions of educability analytical framework.

should they be considered as mutually exclusive. Rather, they should be understood as an attempt at summarising which aspects of the child's life reveal more as regards his or her conditions of educability.[3]

The analytical framework described was used to explore conditions of educability in the city of Belo Horizonte, in the state of Minas Gerais, Brazil. In-depth interviews were carried out with three major groups: students, families and teachers living in contexts marked by extreme poverty. All of the students interviewed were in their last years of primary education (from fifth to eighth grade, which corresponds approximately to ages 11–14) at four schools located on the outskirts of Belo Horizonte.

Parallel to the interviews with students[4] ($n = 46$), interviews with their families ($n = 42$) and teachers ($n = 51$) were also conducted. The interviews gathered information about objective dimensions of the living conditions of the participants and the objective situation of the child at school (academic results, trajectory), but also included participants' opinions and perspectives

about their everyday lives. Teachers and parents' views about the child and children's views about teachers and parents were included to gain a better understanding of how social relations were constructed and shaped children's dispositions towards schooling.

The dynamics of educability and uneducability: the stories of Nestor and Joao

In this section we focus on two cases that demonstrate the usefulness of 'conditions of educability' as an analytical framework for exploring the effects of poverty on education and for reflecting on the policy debates regarding education policies to fight poverty. These two stories are 'paradigmatic cases' of two of the six constructed scenarios: uneducability due to violence and uneducability due to stigma.

Of course, selecting other scenarios and other stories would reveal different aspects of children's conditions of educability, which might be as important as the ones analysed in this article. However, we have chosen to focus on these two selected cases for the following reasons. First, conditions of educability in these two scenarios do not arise directly from the family sphere, as is commonly expected and hypothesised by deficit theories. Secondly, this selection clearly demonstrates the multiple expressions of poverty and, particularly in the case of uneducability due to violence, shows the importance of non-school variables (such as the use of after-school time) in understanding children's educational opportunities. Third, conditions of educability in the two selected cases make the importance of the symbolic and subjective dimensions of poverty and the need to overcome reductionist explanations of school failure or school alienation especially visible. This of course should have consequences on how education policies for fighting poverty are conceived and designed. Finally, by focusing on two cases we opt for a more in-depth analysis with the hope of better illustrating the relationship between conditions of educability, capabilities and school experience.

The cases presented result from long interviews with the children themselves, their mothers and those teachers having the most interaction with them. Interviews with each of the actors focus on the child's experience in school, but also on many different aspects of their everyday life. They aim to acquaint us with the child's objective living conditions, but they also aim to explore the subjective meaning different actors (and mainly children) give to their social relationships and everyday practices.

The power of violence: exploring Nestor's conditions of educability

Nestor is an 11-year-old boy who lives with his mother, his stepfather and his two brothers and two sisters. Economic resources at home come from

state money transfers, from his mother's pension and from his stepfather's work in the informal labour market. Affection is present in all family relations at home. The adults help the children and there are also rules that must be respected by all family members. Nestor stresses his positive relationship with his mother:

> My mum is cool. She is usually quiet, doesn't get angry easily. She talks with us. I don't like getting angry with her. When it happens I don't feel good, I feel angry … She always gives us advice, she tells us how things have to be done.

Despite his opinion, Nestor never follows the family rules. He avoids direct confrontation with his mother, and tries to do his best to avoid her. As a consequence, Nestor's mother gets desperate and loses control. She establishes rules but they do not work. She is perfectly aware of this situation:

> Interviewer: Do you think they [her children] follow your advice?
> Mother: The oldest ones do. All of them are studying and have a profession. They have followed vocational courses, and I hope the younger ones follow their example … we'll see.
> Interviewer: And do they accept the rules or do they complain?
> Mother: Not at all! They don't accept anything! They get angry easily, although in the end they have to accept my rules. Nestor is the most difficult one. Sometimes I have to be really firm with him, otherwise there is no way.

Nestor is profoundly influenced by the violence that characterises his community. The street is his main space of socialisation, and it is the base for constructing his identity, his attitudes and his everyday practices. In this context, street codes neutralise all family efforts at controlling him. They destroy all the capacities for establishing norms and rules and for accompanying Nestor in his education. Violence is so strong that it has become a main reference in Nestor's world. In all his stories there are references to fights, conflicts, weapons. Nestor does not consume drugs and nor do his friends. However, he gets into relationships with youngsters who are older than him and with family relatives who carry guns and other weapons. He is constantly involved in fights, although he states that he only does it when it is 'strictly necessary'. The following quote perfectly illustrates how violence shapes Nestor's discourses, social relations and practices. Nestor's discourse is usually chaotic and disordered. However, the discourse reveals how violence structures his everyday life:

> Ok, I never fight much with others. I'm not one of those who are always fighting. But last week, close to my house a boy started to bother me. And then another joined him and started insulting me. […] Some days later the same happened, and I was burning inside … I did nothing, but … I only hit if … A few days ago my brother started annoying me and I was nervous, I

almost lost my head … I was really mad, very mad … But that boy came with more than 20 kids. I was there with my cousin. He has a gun, and ok, I am not saying anything, but my cousin was carrying an arm and he … several kids jumped on me. I was in the middle of the fight, and I was nervous, and all the kids arrived, all of them fighting. And my cousin just watched, he just watched. A boy knocked me and I fell down. We were on the ground and my cousin shot twice with his gun: pam, pam! And then all the boys ran. They left and did not come back. Two shots: ta, ta … and he was only watching, only watching … and I was on the ground. They kicked me and he was only watching … My mum always says: 'You must not hit'. And I don't, but I was too nervous, I was losing my head … (Nestor)

Nestor's untidy story reveals how violence is profoundly internalised by him. He literally relives and re-presents his experience when he talks about it. Nestor is in the middle of a strong contradiction between the school and the street. And the street is, in this last instance, 'his place'. It is the space that has structuring power to define his forms of being and transiting at the school:

My sisters don't like living here because they say it's dangerous. But I'm not afraid. I like living here. I hang out with everyone in the neighbourhood: children, men … People are good here. The worst thing is to be afraid. If you are afraid everybody is going to piss on you. My cousin always says: you have to always be ready for everything, you don't have to pick on people, but if people pick on you, you can't just stand there, you have to defend yourself; you have to gain everyone's respect. (Nestor)

In fact, Nestor's behaviour and academic results would easily place him under the label of 'student failure'. However, he does not feel as if he is failing at all. He modulates and controls his presence in the school. He does not follow the rules because he cannot, but because he does not want to. His attitude combines separation and accommodation. This teacher's quote clearly reveals Nestor's situation:

The problem with Nestor is that he's very variable. He's good at studying, he's very smart. But he has so many ups and downs … I think that unfortunately he's getting increasingly worse … I don't know exactly why but he's very uncontrolled. (Nestor's teacher)

Nestor knows he can be good at school, and he tries to take advantage of it. One of his teachers refers to him as an intelligent boy, with positive abilities. She says Nestor uses strategies to improve his performance, such as sitting with the best students or being the first to submit his work. However, Nestor does not do his homework and affirms that he never studies at home. His discourse is full of contradictions. Sometimes he shows attachment to the school and sometimes he feels distant from it. The following quotes perfectly illustrate these points:

Interviewer: And do you like studying?
Nestor: Yes, I like it. I've always liked it. I'm not like those kids who jump over the wall and escape from the school. I'm not like those kids who come to school and leave five seconds later.
Nestor: She [his sister] says that this school is the worst.
Interviewer: And what do you think about that?
Nestor: To me, everything is the same shit, better or worse.
Interviewer: Why? Didn't you say you like studying?
Nestor: Because homework is too much, and too boring … It's not that I don't like school, but all these things about homework, it's shit. I don't care if the school is better or worse.

These contradictions are not difficult to understand if we take into account the two worlds that clash in Nestor's life. Despite his instrumental interest in school and his academic abilities, Nestor opposes the expressive order of the school. He misbehaves in the classroom and he does not accept the rules. Moreover, he is the leader of the class. Nestor does not produce an anti-school discourse. He knows he has to take advantage of his educational investment, and this is evidenced in his discourses and practices. However, he brings the codes from the street into the classroom. These codes affect his relationships and behaviour inside the school:

Today Nestor turned to a girl sitting beside him and said to her: 'fuck you …', and this can't be. Between that and a fight there's only one step […], He's very pretentious in class, it's one of his characteristics. He's cynical, ironic. He bothers others and then tries to hide himself. He is a smartass. (Nestor's teacher)

He has a strong leadership over the others. All his colleagues respect him a lot … and I think he uses this power to dominate. I don't know if it's because of his strength, since he's strong. I don't know if it's his ironic nature … You have to be skilful to manage him, otherwise he is able to tease the others in front of you. If he's not interested in what I'm talking about, he talks at the same time. He wants to show his authority, his strength. (Nestor's teacher)

Nestor knows he has a contradictory presence in the school and in the street, and apparently he shows some control over the situation:

Interviewer: Why do you want to study, do you think it is going to be useful?
Nestor: I would like to be a fire-fighter … well I wanted to be a policeman but today … with all the murders and so on, I don't think I want to anymore. Interviewer: Do you think you can achieve it?
Nestor: Mmm … if I keep coming to school, then yes … if I don't lose my head … But if I am in the street doing nothing then I won't. We'll see, it will depend on that.

Interestingly enough, Nestor is perfectly aware of the tension underlying his two worlds but this awareness is not immediately translated into a

capacity to control the situation. Although he knows what he has to do to become a fire-fighter, he recognises how weak his presence is at school, and the power of street codes that 'appeal' to him. This tension causes a variable disposition at school, between a violent socialisation and his accommodation to the minimum school requirements, which are necessary to achieve his goals. Although his level of poverty is not extreme, his experience is reflected in his insertion in a social context where opportunities for personal and educational development are very scarce.

Bearing the stigma of being poor: the case of Joao

Joao is a 14-year-old boy and is in seventh grade in a public school near his home. He belongs to a very poor family. He lives with his mother and with four of his six brothers. His father died recently, but Joao experienced it almost as a relief since his father used to drink and used to hit him. Significantly, Joao never mentions him in his discourse. The scarcity of material resources is visible in Joao's house. His mother works as a cleaner, but she does not have a stable job. Two of his brothers try to contribute economically to the family income, but this is not always possible because of long periods of unemployment.

Despite their poverty situation, members of Joao's family share a strong affective relationship. Joao has an excellent relationship with his mother. She is the cornerstone of the family. Joao's mother talks constantly with her sons, and helps them as much as she can. Joao has a visible and strong relationship with his mother and highly values her capacity to fight for the family and her willingness to help all of them.

Maria, Joao's mother, is a 40-year-old woman. She never finished primary education. Despite her low educational level, she follows her sons' academic situation closely. Pedro (age 15), Joao (age 14) and Ernesto (age 12) are the only ones still in education. Their brothers gave up school before they finished secondary education. Maria does not want the younger ones to do the same. She tries to instil study habits in them. She monitors their school marks and their homework and tries to help them with whatever she can. She always participates in school meetings or as a volunteer in school activities. She is convinced about the importance of education for her sons' future and she is not willing to allow them to leave school prematurely. Her determination is clear in the type of 'culture of effort' she teaches to her children:

> I always tell them that if they want to achieve something in life they have to fight. They can't get others' things. Things have to be achieved by fighting. If you fight you'll get it, otherwise you end up losing everything. For many years I survived thanks to charity. When I got the *Bolsa Escola*[5] I swore I would never ask for charity again. And thank God today I have money to buy food. And that's the way I want my children to grow up. (Maria, Joao's mother)

Somewhat ironically, Maria's opinion opposes those views about poverty which argue that the poor are poor because they do not have a 'culture of effort'.[6] Maria does not want her children to be in the street doing nothing, so she decided to look for different after-school activities for them. She believes after-school activities have a double advantage: she can control her sons' free time and they can receive useful training for their future.

Joao is busy every afternoon during the week. His free time is completely structured. When he leaves school at 11.20 a.m.,[7] he walks home, he has lunch, does his homework and he starts his after-school activities. Three days per week he participates in *Circo do Todo o Mundo* (Circus for Everybody), a project organised by a local non-governmental organisation whose objective is to work towards social inclusion through circus and other cultural activities. Joao loves going to the circus, but the circus is in a different neighbourhood, and transport is expensive for Joao's family. Joao's mother is aware of his motivation in the circus, so she does her best to find resources to pay for the bus, even asking neighbours for help if necessary. If she does not have money for transport, Joao has to go there by foot. She does not want him to miss any session.

On the remaining afternoons he follows a computer course as part of the *Proyecto Providencia* (Providence Project). This is a project set up by a religious organisation to look after children and teenagers from four to 18 years old. The project looks after children for four hours a day and provides food, psychological assistance, and educational and cultural activities such as tutoring, theatre, dance and vocational educational training courses. The centre is close to Joao's house and looks after many children from Joao's school. This is one of the few projects of this kind in the community. There are few vacancies and Joao was on a waiting list for many years before he could get in.

Despite the educational support received by Joao, his mother's help and all the after-school activities, Joao does not have good results at school. His marks are very low and all the teachers complain about his behaviour. They say he is a smart boy, but they affirm that he does not put effort into his schoolwork and he does not show interest. Joao's mother is aware of this. She tries to instil the culture of work and effort in him. She even studies the school lessons with him. And she does not know why it is not working out. She does not know why she cannot motivate him, and why he does not want to study. The teachers say Joao does not respect the school norms, while Joao always complains that teachers scold him. Joao's discourse and practices show a clear resistance towards the school. It is a very conscious and explicit resistance, opposing all school norms.

A teacher describes Joao's position in the school:

> Joao's conditions at home are more than bad, they are deplorable. His father died because of alcoholism and he has gone through terrible situations. And

you see it in his way of being at school, his relationships […] I wouldn't say he's an undisciplined boy. He's simply a boy without motivation. He doesn't see how useful studying can be for him, he doesn't understand it … If I had to define him I would say he's a boy without aspirations, an unmotivated boy. (Joao's teacher)

Joao is perfectly aware of his situation at the school:

I would like to study until secondary education, but afterwards I don't want to. Because I don't want to … Because no matter how much I will study, I know what my job will be. I know I will have to remain here, in the *favela* […] University is for whites, not for us … So, I want to study until secondary education to have a job, but no more … it's going to be useless. If you go somewhere and you tell them you live in the *favela* they will not hire you. I've seen this with other people. People from the *favela*. They studied but they couldn't find a job in the city. (Joao)

Joao has fully internalised the stigma of poverty. He is only 14 years old but has no aspirations. He believes school serves him no purpose. That is why he does not put effort into his schoolwork and rejects the 'promise of an education'. Despite his mother's efforts, he is convinced that school will not be useful to ensure a future away from misery. Joao's lack of a life project and lack of self-confidence hinder his motivation and his possibilities of being successful in school.

Discussion

The stories of Nestor and Joao are two examples of the non-linear and complex relationships between poverty and education. The particular configuration of objective conditions and subjective experiences describes the multiple forms in which experiencing poverty may impact on their learning conditions. Other stories would reflect other configurations, and warn us about the dangerous reductionism of considering a single relationship between poverty and education.

Interestingly, in the two cases analysed, material poverty contextualises Nestor and Joao's experiences, but cannot by itself explain why neither of them has good results at school. Thus, while material conditions are essential to understand why Nestor and Joao do what they do, they cannot provide all the answers regarding their everyday practices, discourses and aspirations. In other words, material conditions of poverty constitute a necessary framework for understanding conditions of educability, but are not sufficient to fully grasp how these conditions are formed and influence children's educational experiences. Their intensity can explain, for instance, why Joao has a more pessimistic attitude than Nestor, but even in the case of Joao, this would be insufficient for understanding his conditions of educability.

To grasp Nestor and Joao's conditions of educability we must explore their living experiences in different settings, and how this experience is internalised to create a specific worldview. This is a crucial aspect to understand the possible sources of Nestor or Joao's problems with their 'functionings'. Regardless of whether such problems are more or less acute, what is noteworthy is that their source is neither a personal inability nor a 'direct' effect of poverty (as a deficit) on their learning difficulties. Actually, while in contexts of poverty teachers frequently underline some kind of 'learning difficulties' in children, this is not at all the case for Nestor and Joao. In the case of Nestor, teachers see him as a very smart boy. In the case of Joao, they point out problems of motivation and detachment from school activities.

In other words, it is not that poverty as a generic category produces forms of deprivation and deficit, undermining children's capabilities (and learning difficulties). What poverty does is shape a lived experience in different ways, which might prevent children from following a regular or expected path at school. In most cases this experience undermines their capabilities and functioning, but the factors causing these shortcomings can be extremely diverse. Poverty informs us about the context, but does not tell us why a child does not learn at school. To determine the reason we need to observe the specific interaction between children's objective living conditions, their social experiences and the subjective dispositions towards the school and the learning process. That is what we call conditions of educability.

Somewhat paradoxically, the social and material context alone cannot explain Nestor and Joao's experiences, but it is strong enough to create an experience that would never occur in a different type of context. In other words, it is the specific context of poverty that explains Nestor and Joao's ways of interpreting their position in the school and their 'learning possibilities'. And this is clearly a process that takes place before the acquisition of capabilities can take place.

Interestingly enough, Nestor and Joao have what could be considered compensatory factors of their poverty situation. Unlike many other poor children, they have active mothers who care about them and do their best to improve their school experiences. In the case of Joao, his mother even invests in after-school activities to ensure he is not on the street and to give him more opportunities. Moreover, teachers do not see them as 'lost' students, as often happens when teachers talk about poor children. Although their interpretations of Nestor and Joao's situations are different, they do not attribute their difficulties to personal capacities or personal underdevelopment. Rather, teachers recognise their family and social contexts as decisive factors to understand Nestor and Joao's problems.

Despite these positive compensatory factors, there are forces that are strong enough to impinge on Nestor and Joao's conditions of educability. In

the case of Nestor, violence is so present in his life that it has completely penetrated his worldview. Violence gives him alternative codes to those of the school and becomes a space of production of meaning and sense. Nestor feels and is aware of the tension between the world of the street and the world of the school, and knows that sooner or later he will have to commit to one or the other, as he knows that the consequences of his choice will be decisive in his life. The violent context of the *favela* and his cousin's figure counteract the role of his mother or the opinion of teachers who see him as a clever student with leadership abilities. As regards Joao, he refuses to follow the rules of an institution that he sees as useless to compensate for the social stigma of poverty. Joao's subjective interpretation of his context is also strong enough to neutralise his mother's efforts and other educational investments. His conditions of educability are marked by his experience of inequality and unfairness. His views are based on what he sees, and are powerful enough to destroy other forms of investing in his education.

Conclusions: conditions of educability and policy implications

This article has spotlighted how the different ways in which poverty is manifested have different repercussions on the school experience. The two cases presented reveal the dangers of reducing poverty to a simple collective category and ignoring the specificity of each experience, and also show the power of the social and cultural *milieu* in shaping the objective position of poor children in the school and their worldview. Other stories would stress children's unique experiences; all of them marked by the experience of poverty but with particular manifestations.

These two stories confirm how important it is to assess the effects of poverty on education before planning possible strategies to overcome poverty through education. If there is more than one form of experiencing poverty, then there is no single education policy that can be universal for fighting poverty. In fact, exploring the conditions of poor children's educability offers us a resource for understanding why certain social and educational policies aimed at changing the living conditions and learning of poor groups can give rise to such disparate results, or why economic investment, curriculum changes or teaching methods do not always yield the expected or desirable results. Focusing on educability obviously requires us to explore policies that extend beyond purely sectorial action and encompass the different dimensions of the children's lives, which prevent them from making the most of their time at school.

Indeed, Nestor and Joao's experience is as marked by poverty as it is unique, and their distance from what school offers will rarely depend on education system variables, such as curriculum, pedagogy or forms of assessment. Nestor and Joao's conditions of educability have much more to do with what they experience outside the school interacting with their

school experience. In other words, a change in the curriculum will not change Joao's pessimism about his stigma of being poor, because his aspirations do not depend on what is taught at school.

Working on improving the learning conditions of poor children like Nestor and Joao is of course a complex task, but the first step for any policy has to focus on those conditions that prevent children from acquiring basic skills. If poor children's capabilities are to be ensured, if education is to contribute to developing the necessary functionings for social inclusion, then policies must focus on non-school factors as much as on school factors. There are new tendencies in education policy pointing in this direction. The well-known No Child Left Behind programme in the United States has recently been criticised for not attending sufficiently to non-school factors such as low birth weight, inadequate medical care, food security, environmental pollutants, family relations or neighbourhood characteristics (Berliner 2009). If non-school factors are not taken into account, then we run the risk of making 'schools accountable for achievement without regard for factors over which schools have little control' (Berliner 2009, 40).

Only by adopting a broader vision of the obstacles to learning – that is, only by recognising how poverty affects education – will we succeed in developing effective educational policies to reduce poverty.

Notes

1. For an account of these omissions, see Bonal (2007) or Bonal et al. (2010).
2. See McCowan (2011, 291) for an interesting discussion on this matter.
3. The research project explored six scenarios of educability and uneducability: educability through opportunity, educability through investment, uneducability by disaffection, uneducability by stigma, uneducability by violence, and chronic uneducability. See Bonal et al. (2010) for a complete description of all scenarios.
4. Apart from the criteria mentioned, which are common to all students in the sample, the sample is diverse in terms of students' sex, educational background and social conditions.
5. *Bolsa Escola* was a Conditional Cash Transfer Programme linked to school attendance. Belo Horizonte used to have one of the most complete Conditional Cash Transfer Programme in Brazil, with significant levels of coverage and a generous monetary transfer.
6. See Wright (1994) for an analysis on the discourses about poverty.
7. There are usually three school time slots in Belo Horizonte's poor schools (and in most Brazilian cities), which last only for four hours each.

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