This is a post–peer-review, precopyedited version of an article published in *Boyhood Studies*. The definitive publisher-authenticated version TOLEDO, Cinthia T; CARVALHO, Marilia P. The peer groups agency in a Brazilian school. *Boyhood Studies*, 13, nº 2, Winter 2020, 71-86 is available online at: https://doi.org/10.3167/bhs.2020.130206

The peer groups agency in a Brazilian school

Abstract: Black working-class boys are the group with the most significant difficulties in their schooling process. In a dialogue with Raewyn Connell, we seek to analyze how the collective conceptions of peer groups have influenced the school engagement of Brazilian boys. We conducted an ethnographic research with students around the age of 14 at an urban state school in the periphery of the city of São Paulo. We analyzed the hierarchization process between two groups of boys, demonstrating the existence of a collective notion of masculinity that works against engagement with the school. Well-known to the Anglophone academic literature, this association is rather uncommon in the Brazilian literature. We have therefore attempted to describe and analyze here the challenges faced by Black working-class Brazilian boys to establish more positive educational trajectories.

Keywords: gender school regimes, masculinities, peer groups, periphery, power relations.

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Acknowledgements

Sao Paulo Research Foundation (FAPESP) has been supporting this work by grant 2017/23325-3.

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Introduction

In the present article we seek to demonstrate how the ideas developed by Raewyn Connell about the schooling of boys in industrialized countries, put forward in her book *The Men and the Boys* (Connell, 2000), can be useful in the conduction of studies about the schooling of Black working-class boys within the Brazilian context, a subject still sparsely seen in our national literature.

After contextualizing the debate about masculinities and education in Brazil, we introduce a partial analysis from an ethnographic research developed at a public school located in the periphery of the city of São Paulo involving students aged around 14. We highlight the power relations between two groups of boys that signal to the existence of a collective notion of masculinity that runs counter to engagement with the school.

Although the difficulty of working-class boys to demonstrate interest in their studies is well-known to the Anglophone literature, we still have to build a corresponding theoretical and empirical corpus that reflects about the reality of Brazilian society. In this sense, we try to describe and analyze how the boys' collective notion of masculinity seemed to hinder the possibility of boys constituting themselves as students.

On the schooling of Black working-class Brazilian boys

Throughout the latter half of the 20th century the Brazilian education system went through significant changes that expanded the access of layers of population hitherto excluded from basic formal education. During that same period female students began to display longer, more linear school trajectories, subverting the historically superior educational indicators among boys and men (Beltrão and Alves 2009). Considering the articulation of data by sex, race and class, working-class

Black boys face the hardest obstacles to pursue long-lived and successful school trajectories in Brazil (Artes and Oliveira 2019; Ferraro 2010).

The study of the more troubled schooling processes of certain groups of Brazilian boys calls attention to educational problems that are often investigated in our national context as if they had no relation to gender or masculinities. It is also important to clarify that the inversion of the gender gap in Brazil was not mobilized systematically by conservative and anti-feminist groups, as was the case in the USA and United Kingdom (Connell 2000; Epstein et al. 1998). While in the 1990s we observed the "boy turn" in studies about gender and education in the Global North (Weaver-Hightower 2003), we cannot say that the same trend was consolidated in Brazil, despite the existence of some studies on this theme and of a growing interest in the discussion about masculinities within the Social Sciences in general.

In this context of shortage of researches on masculinities and education, one of the authors of this article began to dedicate herself to understand the lower educational indicators of Brazilian boys of the late 1990s (Carvalho 2001; 2004; 2009; Carvalho et al. 2016). An assessment of the national academic production on gender and school performance identified a lack of studies that attempted to nuance the explanations for the inferior school performance of boys based on investigations of the interactions within peer groups (Carvalho 2012). We therefore decided to develop an ethnographic research involving first a group of children aged around 10 (Toledo and Carvalho 2018), and then a group of teenagers aged around 14, both studies involving working-class, predominantly Black students in the city of São Paulo, Brazil.

Raewyn Connell's work has been a fundamental reference in the development of these studies because it deals with masculinities within a broader gender theory, and because it allows

thinking the plurality of masculinities and hierarchies internal to the group of boys without giving up a feminist perspective (Connell 2000; 2005; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Connell and Pearse 2015). In order to analyze the school daily life, we envisage that there is a "gender regime" at play in schools that works upon the formation of conceptions and practices of femininity and masculinity among students through power relations, division of labor, patterns of emotion and symbolism (Connell, 2000). Still following Raewyn Connell (2000), we assume that the school is also a setting for the agency of pupils, where groups of peers are the bearers of collective conceptions of gender. Inserted in the gender order of their peers, boys and girls are active in the socialization process; they negotiate, rebuild, re-signify, and deny practices of masculinity and femininity.

The Anglophone academic literature is rich with studies that deal with the association between school engagement and femininity in the collective conceptions of groups of peers, particularly among working-class boys. This association appears in the literature since the time of classic studies previous to the elaboration of the Research on Men and Masculinities, as for example Paul Willis' ((1977) 1981) ethnographic study with White boys living in one of the oldest industrial districts in England. On the other hand, during the last decades many researchers have tried to explore both the multiplicity of masculinities within the working class and the changes observed in masculinities due to social changes affecting the lives of young men, such as the deindustrialization process, the expansion of the service sector, and unemployment (Connell 1989; Dolby, Dimitriadis, and Willis 2004; Roberts 2018; Ward 2014).

However, the same buildup of studies cannot be identified in Brazil. While the dialogue with the literature on masculinities produced in the Global North – or in what 20 years ago Connell (2000) called "industrialized countries" – can be very proficuous to understand the Brazilian

society, it demands an effort of mediation to avoid overlooking the social and historical differences between the two contexts. These are differences that involve from apparently small details in the functioning of the school daily life up to larger differences, such as the very constitution of our educational system with its sharp race and class cleavage. Since their origins, our public schools were designed to cater for the non-White population and for the working classes, whilst the children of the predominantly White elites attended various types of private schools during basic education (Dávilla 2006).

Clearly, differences are not restricted to the educational system. What we mean when we say that our research was carried out with pupils from the "working class" needs to be nuanced. In a country of late industrialization such as Brazil, the working class never assumed the same characteristics of the working class in the Global North. Even if industrial labor has been a reference for jobs between the 1930s and the 1980s in São Paulo (Brazil), industrialization took place side-by-side with a wider service sector, and the working class always derived its subsistence from autonomous labor within informal markets without any kind of social protection (Oliveira 2013). On this side of the Equator, more than the expansion of the service sector and growth of unemployment, the production restructuring of the 1990s implied in the "updating of a history of long duration", blurring even more the borders between legal work, informal work, illegal work and illicit work among the impoverished segments of the working class (Telles and Hirata 2011).

Apart from that, almost 400 years of a slave-based production system preceded the constitution of the dependent (or peripheral) capitalism in Brazil. When they were freed, Black workers were marginalized and replaced by a White European workforce following an immigration policy subsidized by the State and created with the objective of promoting the whitening of the local population. In this sense, racism has an economic dimension that structures the constitution

of the working class in Brazil. Systematically marginalized and discriminated against, the Black population is overrepresented in the lower echelons of the social hierarchy, although they currently correspond to more than 50% of the country's population (Moura 2019).

Bearing in mind these social and historical differences, alongside the lack of studies about masculinities and education in Brazil, some initial questions must still be asked to allow us to understand how gender, race and class are articulated in the production of more troubled or uneven school trajectories among Black working-class boys. In a previous research conducted with children aged around 10 no tension was identified among boys related to their displaying of commitment to their studies. On the other hand, the associations between Black masculinity, irrationality, and corporality (hooks 2004; Fanon 2008) seemed to hinder the affirmation of Black boys as good pupils in interactions among peers (Toledo and Carvalho 2018).

We therefore argue that Connell's considerations in *The Men and the Boys (2000)* allowed us to develop research questions to understand the schooling of Brazilian boys. Admitting the agency of students and the importance of the group of peers in the elaboration of collective notions of masculinity (Connell, 2000), we initiated the current research by investigating whether we would find in the interactions among boys aged around 14 notions of masculinity contrary to school engagement.

In the following section, we show that a collective notion of masculinity contrary to school engagement did indeed become relevant within our context. This association appeared when we analyzed the interactions between peers, namely the division of boys into "front rows" and "back rows". More than affirming the existence of this association, we are interested here in describing

and analyzing what the hierarchies among boys can tell us about different social relations, the schooling processes, and the formation of masculinities in the urban Brazilian society.

About the fieldwork

Bearing in mind the objectives mentioned above, we conducted an ethnographic research at an urban state school in São Paulo. The City of São Paulo produces a significant part of the national wealth and is home to an upper-middle-class and an elite of high purchasing power, consumer of luxury goods and owners of the largest fleet of private jets in the world. At the same time, the city is structured by strong patterns of segregation and social inequality, in which the impoverished sectors of the population live in *favelas* marked by the operation of illegal markets and by police violence (Kowarick and Marques 2011). In the neighborhood of the school studied here there are areas frequented by the predominantly White middle-class and elite, such as a golf course, luxury residential condominiums, and the University of São Paulo. Differently from the widely disseminated pictures of *favelas* in Rio de Janeiro's hills, the *favelas* around the school occupy the lower portions of the territory, at the margins of the rivers and, therefore, are subject to flooding and geographically hidden from those who do not live in them.

The students at the school selected came from the working-class, chiefly Blacks living in these various *favelas* located around the school. Teachers and the school management team regarded the school as being located in a peripheral area of the city. In this case, the word *periphery* was not used in its geographical sense to indicate physical distance from the city center, but rather as a social category to refer to precarious living conditions, and to the lack of material means and social rights to which pupils were subjected. It is important, therefore, to emphasize that the analyses indicated here are referred to this context, within a country of continental dimensions and countless internal differences and inequalities.

Although the economic production restructuring of the 1990s blurred even further the borders between formal, informal, illegal, and illicit labor, significant changes took place in the daily life and in the way in which peripheral areas are perceived publicly. Formerly seen predominantly as the city areas where the working classes lived, and as spaces of popular political organization, peripheries began to be more and more publicly depicted as dangerous regions, and its inhabitants, chiefly young Black men, as potential criminals. Within the peripheries, the "crime world" also acquired more legitimacy for part of the residents, either because it afforded material gains higher than the possibilities offered by the legal labor market, or because of the symbolic gains associated, for example, to the status and recognition within the circles of sociability of teenagers. These changes, in their turn, represent a tension for the daily lives of residents of the peripheries, deeply permeated by the distinction between workers and criminals, and constantly afflicted by public policies of mass incarceration and police violence (Feltran 2011).

We selected the school where the study was developed considering the previous contact with its principal and her willingness to authorize the conduction of the research. It is a school that was acquiring recognition in the University for having a managing team committed to the idea of improving the quality of education offered to the population. A participant observation study was conducted by one of the authors of this article, Cinthia Toledo, between March and December 2018 with two classes of the 9th and last year of the Brazilian Fundamental Education. The expected student age for the 9th year is 14, but in the group studied there were pupils as old as 18, as a consequence of successive school failures along their trajectories. Each class had approximately 30 students between boys and girls.

The observations took place in classes of different disciplines, in school breaks, school outings and festivities, with a frequency of three observations per week during the nine months of fieldwork. The observations of the school daily life were recorded on fieldwork notebooks, and we

also conducted interviews with eight girls, 14 boys and five teachers[i]. The interviews were recorded, the material was transcribed and is currently being analyzed with the support of NVivo software. We present here a specific part of the research, exploring with more detail the testimonies of some of the boys who better exhibited the polarity perceived between the two groups. Between those extremes, there is a multiplicity of practices of masculinity that will not be explored in this article.

We shall deal mainly with an opposition between a group who called themselves the *back rows* (*fundão* in Portuguese) and that labelled the other group of boys as the *retards* (*mongões* in Portuguese). Since the term *retards* was rather offensive, the boys labelled as *retards* preferred to speak of themselves as the *front rows*. Thus, the term *front rows* referred to the opposition between the groups by highlighting the division of places occupied in the classroom; however, the division between them alluded to more than just the physical location of each group in the classroom. It spoke above all of rather contrasting ways of being, and practices of masculinity.

The existence of these groups did not demarcate a rigid distinction between boys appraised negatively by teachers in opposition to those appraised positively. In both groups there were boys regarded as good pupils by teachers and that were in the 9th year at the age considered as adequate. However, it was the case that most older boys belonged to the *back rows*, whereas in the *front rows* only 14-year-olds were to be found. Additionally, *front rows* rarely entered in conflict with teachers or contested the school rules. Therefore, we can say that, taken as a group, there seemed to be a vague perception that *front row* boys would follow more linear and less conflicted school trajectories, albeit not necessarily with high performance.

Although the opposition between *back rows* and *front rows* cannot explain all dynamics in the gender order among groups of peers, it seems to evince challenges faced by the boys to constitute themselves as students vis-à-vis the conceptions of gender of their groups of peers. In

the next section we deal with the distinction between these two groups, trying to highlight the configuration of the practice of masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) of higher prestige in the interactions among peers.

On the relations between practices of masculinity

In a Portuguese Language class, some boys had put a note on Lucas's back saying, "kick me". They laughed together and seemed to be amused with the prank. Silently, Lucas just removed the note from his back, made a paper ball of it and placed it on top of the table. He just kept looking ahead as if nothing had happened [Fieldnote extract]

Front-row boys were frequently taunted in situations similar to the one described above. Pedro was a 14-year-old student and was laughing at Lucas in that situation. He had entered the school in that year, but he knew many of the students from before, from interactions in his neighborhood. During his interview, one of the researchers recalled the episode when Lucas was mocked, and asked him to explain why they were messing with him:

> *Pedro: Oh, I don't know, because of the way he is, like, he's very focused on studying, he ends up losing track of things, he gets, like, too focused. So, the guys want to get on his nerves, you know; they want to nag him [Individual Interview, Pedro,* back row*].*

Being too committed to the school activities was one of the reasons for provocations among boys. To be focused on a school task was not seen as an attitude that would allow a better

understanding of the facts, but as something that got in the way of perceiving what was happening around them. In the eyes of the *back rows*, the *front rows* were *retards* because they were disconnected from the world, passive and childish:

> *Pedro: It's what I said, they start doing some task and break off from the world, they just keep their faces glued to the book, kissing the book. Kissing the book, the face glued to it, the eye in the middle of the book, like that. He shuts himself off the world. When he starts doing a lesson, he disconnects from the world. These are the real retards, isn't it? They don't like talking; they, like, among themselves, they talk among themselves. And the worst, their attitude, they look very childish; I know I am in the 9th grade, I play around, I talk, I play, I do this and that, but I also… there is that childish part, but also going into adolescence, into maturity; but they, it seems there will never mature, they just keep drawing on the notebook. How come? [Individual Interview, Pedro,* back row*].*

Thus, when perceiving that he was no longer a child, Pedro evaluates the attitudes of the *front rows* as incompatible with *maturity*. Jim Walker (1988), when analyzing the interactions between different groups of boys in an Australian inner-school, signals to the articulation between masculinity and maturity, in which in order to be a man one has to be a "grown-up" person. In the context investigated by Jim Walker (1988), the perception that the moment had arrived to stop being a child made one of the students move away from footballer culture, aspiring to academic success. In our research context, among the *back rows*, stop being a child meant moving away from the form of school commitment perceived among the *front rows*.

It is also interesting to point out the use of the idea that *front rows* 'kissed the notebook', since the *back rows* were also valued for expressing openly, and even through practices of harassment, the desire to establish heterosexual relations with the school girls. In a different situation, some boys questioned Miguel, another *front row*: *"Have you finished [the activity]? Man, you are very… intelligent! I was going to say nerd! Tell them [to girls in the classroom] that you can help them if they give you a kiss. You're not smart? You have to use intelligence in your favor" [Fieldnote Extract]*.

Taken as a group, the *back rows* seemed to enjoy a higher prestige in interactions between boys and girls. Thus, we argue that the notion of maturity of the *back rows* comprised the configuration of the practice of masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) that was more valued by that group of peers. A masculinity constructed in opposition to school commitment. Thus, even if many *back rows* were assessed positively by their teachers, they tended to speak of themselves as *bad pupils*.

Cinthia: Is there somebody you think is a bad pupil?

Pedro: We all are, we back rows*.*

Cinthia: All of you?

Pedro: Because we being back rows*, we mess around a lot; then, for the teachers is: "good Lord, those guys are less committed". Then it gets kind of awkward, you know, we are the guys that are not going to do anything (...)*

Cinthia: You think they underestimate you, thinking like that? They think you're going to be bad pupils...

Pedro: I don't know, I can't read minds, but by the way they look at you, they seem to think: "This guy, it's going to be either coffin or jail" [Individual Interview]

In the excerpt above, Pedro also identified in the teachers' look the negative expectation that they would be either arrested or dead in urban conflicts: "it's going to be either coffin or jail". Therefore, if "to understand gender, then, we must constantly go beyond gender" (Connell 2005: 76), the student's testimony reveals the importance of considering the periphery context in our analyses.

The periphery context will have implications that go beyond the negative expectations of teachers, also influencing the interactions between peers. In informal conversations with the *back rows* we could find elements of a valuation of illicit practices or of small violations of legality. In his interview, Denis speaks about the experience of being caught smoking weed inside the school and also about the high valuation of another colleague, Alberto:

Cinthia: Why did you want to smoke weed inside the school if you can smoke outside?
Denis: Today if you are, like, a drug user, if you are a criminal, if you are in crime, if you sell drugs, you have fucking high status, you know what I mean? And I... I wanted to create this status for me, to become a bad ass (...) Then, if you do drugs, if you talk back to the teacher, you make some of the girls look at you.
Interviewer: But you think you have that status? In your class, who has that kind of status?
Denis: Oh, like, the guys worship Alberto, you know what I mean? Oh man, I don't worship him. He is just a normal guy like me. But I talk to him, he's one of my friends.

But the guys go: "Wow, Alberto skips class, smokes weed". Police brought him here to the school one day. Police caught him with a joint in the park. A simple joint, but because he skipped class they brought him here to the school gate. Then everybody got around him: "Wow, what happened?" [...] Then, Alberto said: "No, I duped them. Then everybody goes: "Wow, he's a bad ass, he managed to dupe the cops" [Individual Interview, Denis, back row*].*

Denis's testimony shows which practices allow boys to earn status in the relationships between peers and with the girls. Although smoking weed in school is not something restricted to Black working-class boys, it is important to emphasize that these are the groups that live daily with the illegal market present in the area, experiencing directly the effects of the policy of criminalizing drugs, mass incarceration and police repression that falls on the periphery population.

Also, we noticed that in the interactions between peers, boys from the back row tended to emphasize a periphery identity. Living in the *favela*, for example, was a point of pride in many comments made by *back rows*, whereas living outside the *favela* was a source of inferiority in the interactions among peers. Thus, making symbols and practices associated to the periphery as positive, *back rows* seemed to invert the wider social hierarchy that tends to stigmatize youngsters from the periphery.

Cinthia: So, you think that the problem [that makes front rows *inferior] is not so much being seen as a good student?*

Lucas: Well, being a good student is part of it. But it's got a lot to do with the way you look, the way you carry yourself, if other people think you're stuck up, and where you come from. It's a lot of things. I see almost half of the class outside school, in the

streets. I live next to them; I live in the favela. Understand me? I live in the same place as them, but there comes Miguel who lives in the condominium, in a building, then he's already a bit stuck up. Understand me? [Individual Interview with Lucas, front row*].*

Boys from the front row, on the other hand, seemed to move away from identification as subjects from the periphery. They normally avoided describing the places where they lived by the names of the *favelas*. Lucas, for example, normally referred to the place where he lived using the name of the neighborhood, only revealing that he actually lived in a favela when he explained the hierarchy criteria among boys during the interview transcribed above. They also rejected funk music explicitly and eloquently, the music style eminently Black, young and peripheric: *"Yeah, like, people like funk music; so, automatically, there's slang in their speech; and, this slang, it's… It's a different way of speaking, a different taste, you know? [Interview in couple, Lucas,* front row*].*

Thus, *back rows* emphasized their belonging to the periphery and, at the same time, devalued *front rows* that seemed to make the opposite movement. *Front rows*, in turn, tended to shy away from such practices of masculinity, referring to themselves more as timid, quiet, and also condemning the use of drugs when talking to their colleagues. Moreover, *front rows* seemed sometimes to indicate a self-perception that they would be better than *back rows*, despite occupying a lower position in the hierarchy among boys from the 9th year of the school researched:

Lucas: But actually, they are the retards, isn't it, they are not studying, they don't give a damn. They are the ones that are lost in life. But, also, it's much to do with their upbringing, like, I think the mother and the father has a fundamental role in this part

of the student, you know? And that was what I was taught, you understand? Respecting, paying attention, you know? Not getting mixed up with the wrong stuff [Individual Interview, front row*]*

Despite the movement of distinguishing between the two groups of boys, it is important to recognize that the collective notion of masculinity contrary to school commitment placed both *front rows* and *back rows* under tension to demonstrate interest in their studies. Besides *front rows* being systematically taunted by the *back rows*, the interview conducted in couple with Antônio and Lucas shows them trying to distance themselves from the image of hard-working boys, saying that they were in fact "neutral" boys:

Antônio: I am, like, I'm neutral… more or less, it's that I am more with the front rows*.*
Lucas: Because we… I don't see myself as a front row*. I am quite neutral also, I am in the middle, I'm the guy that scores seven in exams, or eight, like that. You understand? That, like, only pays attention in class, just… just to get a good grade, just enough to be approved.*
Interviewer: The neutral people are the guys who are more quiet, but who don't do much homework. Is that it?
Lucas: It's the quiet guys, they don't do nothing, but they also don't…
Antônio: Don't fail to do it.
Lucas: ... Don't get mixed up with nothing, like a neutral kid.
Antônio: Neutral kid.
[Interview in couple with Antônio e Lucas, front rows*]*

Roberts (2018) in his study with English working-class young men aged between 18 and 24 argues that his interviewees "did not consider themselves to be either disruptive lads or swot-like ear`oles. Instead, they regularly implied that the occupied a role of the 'in-betweener`" (Roberts, 2018: 86). The author also argues that gender is less important than class and race when thinking about the low participation of those young men in higher education. Despite differences in context and research objectives, in our context even boys considered as retards by the *back rows* wanted to be positioned more to the back then to the front, which in our analysis does not diminish the importance of gender to think the relations of boys with the school. On the contrary, such shift to the middle reinforces the relevance of collective conceptions of masculinity contrary to the engagement with the school in the group of peers.

Analyzing the relation that working-class girls establish with schooling processes can be an important counterpoint to think the relevance of gender relations in the relations established by boys with education, which will not be developed in the present article. However, it is important to note also that it was not possible to observe a similar division as back row against front row among girls. On the contrary, in interviews with them it became clear that the girls seen as having better financial situations enjoyed higher prestige in interactions among their peers. Those same girls were also recognized as having better school performance, without it being seen as negative by their group of peers.

Final considerations

The valuation of practices of masculinity similar to the ones valued by *back rows* is not necessarily a novelty in the field of Studies on Men and Masculinities, particularly when we talk about boys from marginalized groups. However, considering the lack of studies in the Brazilian context, it is still necessary to make an effort to create an empirical and theoretical corpus on the relations of boys with the school. We understand very little about how gender, race, and class articulate in the construction of unequal educational trajectories in Brazil (Pinho and Giugliani 2014).

The work of Raewyn Connell has been a central reference in the construction of this objective because of the subtle way in which it theorizes gender as a structure, without neglecting the agency of subjects and the power relations between the multiple masculinities. Drawing from *The Men and the Boys* (Connell, 2000), we based our study more specifically on the discussion made by the author about the education of boys in industrialized countries, highlighting in the present article the importance of considering the collective notions of gender of the groups of peers as a proficuous path to understand the more troubled schooling processes of Black working-class boys in Brazil. As rightly put by Connell (2000), to problematize the relations of boys with education is also a question of social justice.

The emphasis on a periphery identity, the challenge to what was seen as licit, legal, and even to police authority, seemed to be a relevant theme and an important source of power in the interactions between peers. Although these are partial results of an ongoing research, it seems important to consider how much this configuration of practice of masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) can also be permeated by a native notion of maturity that opposes the practices of school engagement.

These considerations are not meant to reinforce the stereotype that all boys positioned themselves against school rules or were involved in acts of confrontation against legality. The

multiplicity of masculinities and the multiple forms of negotiation with collective notions of gender are important premises of our research. Nevertheless, we argue that without analyzing the collective notions of gender and the sources of local power and prestige we cannot understand the challenges faced by all boys to establish positive educational trajectories.

During the preparation of this article, one of the students that participated in this study was brutally murdered by the police. We dedicate our work to him and to all boys from the periphery.

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[i] We observed the ethical principles of research with human beings and the commitment to avoid damage to research subjects. Parents and those legally responsible for pupils were informed about the research and signed Informed Consent Forms authorizing their children to give interviews. All names appearing here have been changed.