Zafar, so good: middle-class students, school habitus and secondary schooling in the city of Buenos Aires (Argentina)

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This article examines how students from the 'loser' sections of the middle class dealt with the game of secondary schooling in a 'good' state school in the city of Buenos Aires (Argentina). It engages with Bourdieu's theory of social practice and, in particular, with its concepts of game, habitus and cultural capital. It argues that middle-class students embody a school habitus, which I call *zafar*. *Zafar* (a Spanish slang word) refers to students' dispositions, practices and strategies towards social and educational demands of teachers and their school. *Zafar* propels middle-class students to be just 'good enough' students, and promote an instrumental approach to schooling and learning. Although this paper offers an account within which the reproduction of relative educational advantage of a group of middle-class students takes place, it also poses questions about their future educational and occupational opportunities.

Keywords: secondary schooling; habitus; Bourdieu; Argentina; middle class

Introduction

At the turn of the 2000s, growing levels of unemployment, sub-employment, high levels of informality, and decreasing salaries characterised the Argentinean social landscape. This socio-economic crisis deepened social polarisation and promoted a fracture within the middle classes between 'loser' and 'winner' sections. This social reshaping took place in an educational scenario characterised by decentralised governance, a new structure of compulsory schooling, elevation of the school leaving age (until 16 years old), high levels of educational inequalities, and the crystallisation of circuits of schooling (at primary and secondary levels).

Numerous studies have examined the relationships between socio-economic re-structuring and educational fragmentation at secondary level. The majority of these have attempted to unpack the nature and scope of students' educational

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failure, defined as dropping out or repetition of a school year. Hence, poor and/
or vulnerable families and their children have been the focus of attention.
Despite its centrality in the historic configuration and transformation of second-
ary schooling, few researchers have recently examined middle-class students'
and families' views and experiences of secondary schooling.

This article fills a gap in the Argentinean literature by looking at how
middle-class students from the 'loser' sections of the middle-class dealt with
the game of secondary schooling in a 'good' state school in the city of Buenos
Aires. Following Svampa (2005), the term 'loser' refers to those families who
have been impoverished by recent processes of economic restructuring in the
early 2000s. Their heads had at least secondary schooling and were non-
manual workers in the state or private sector in companies disconnected from
the new informational and communicational structures favoured by the global
order (Svampa 2005).

This paper engages with Bourdieu's theory of social practice and, in partic-
ular, with its concepts of game, habitus and cultural capital. In so doing, it
engages with recent debates on social class and education in the United
Kingdom (Ball 2003; Kehily and Pattman 2006). Bourdieu's framework illu-
minates how middle-class students in High Mountain[1] secondary school were
able to routinely reproduce their relative educational advantage. Moreover,
these concepts require us to go beyond students' everyday practices and to
consider the wider field of secondary schooling and its relationships with other
social fields (such as the labour market and the higher education fields).
However, like any other analytic perspective, Bourdieu's network of concepts
has its limits (see Dillabough 2004; Sayer 2005). His theoretical lenses amplify
certain features of the game and players at High Mountain –like middle-class
students' propensity to accept secondary school's stake – while obscuring
others, such as individuals' reflexivity, the variable activation of 'cards' or
'resources', and gender differences and identities.

The first section maps out some key Argentinean studies on social class
and secondary schooling, paying special attention to the few focused on
middle-class students. The second part examines Bourdieu's concepts of
game, habitus and cultural capital. The next section describes the socio-
economic and institutional context and key methodological features of my
study. Then I argue that middle-class students embody a school habitus, which
I call *zafar*. *Zafar* refers to students' dispositions, practices and strategies
towards social and educational demands of teachers and their school. *Zafar* is
a Spanish slang word, which means 'releasing from a commitment or obliga-
tion', 'to escape or hide in order to avoid an encounter or risk' and 'to avoid
something that annoys you' (Real Academia Española 2001; author's transla-
tion). Whilst my analysis presents evidence of Argentinean middle-class
students' apparent ability to get by with little effort, I do not claim that the
phenomenon I discuss is limited to the particular case in question. The follow-
ing part explains the nature of *zafar*. Although this paper offers an account

within which the reproduction of relative educational advantage takes place, I also pose questions about middle-class students' future educational and occupational opportunities.

Social class and schooling: the absent middle class

In western developed societies like the United Kingdom, the analysis of the dyad of social class and educational inequality has been central to the configuration of the sub-field of sociology of education. It is only recently that analyses have begun to focus on the nature of middle-class schooling (Power et al. 2003). Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and cultural capital have been fruitful to examine the relationships between the middle class and schooling (Ball 2003).

In Argentina, socio-educational research has shown that unequal living conditions, family income, educational level of parents and/or type of occupation are all related to unequal educational performance. Research has principally examined how students, mainly from poor or vulnerable families, experience different aspects of schooling and produce specific social identities. The 'socio-structural' research tradition, for instance, looks at the relationships between social groups' locations in the socio-economic structure and their differential access, performance/school failure and/or permanence at the secondary level of education (Meo 2008). This tradition identifies a collection of socio-economic factors strongly associated with them – such as poverty, levels of income and/or global volume of households' educational resources (Cervini 2005). Its theoretical underpinning tends to be implicit. In contrast, within the research tradition that is marked by an identity/subjectivity turn, various qualitative studies have mainly focused on the production of poor students' social, educational and/or individual identities within schools' social relations and available social and educational discourses (Duschatzky and Corea 2002). Theoretically, they engage with a wide range of perspectives ranging from Bourdieu's theory of cultural production to post-structuralist psychoanalytic approaches.

However, a few studies pay attention to the middle classes and their relationships with schooling. These belong to the 'socio-educational' research tradition, which unpacks recent processes of fragmentation and/or segmentation of the educational system. The majority have scrutinised middle-class school choice, and parents' views of education and schooling. Regarding school choice, for instance, Veleda (2007) shows that different sections of the middle-class deploy diverse strategies, and draw upon a range of economic, social and cultural resources. In relation to middle-class perspectives on schooling, for example, the study of Tiramonti and Minteaguiaga (2004) argues that middle-class families who sent their children to state schools have distinctive views from those held by elite social groups and *sectores populares*. They all agree that the school should educate and socialise their children. However, elite parents viewed it as a site of social and cultural differentiation; middle-class

families saw it as a means to gain autonomy; and parents from poor families associated it with protection from a hostile and dangerous outside world.

A few qualitative studies explore middle-class students' experiences of secondary schooling (Kantor 2000; Kessler 2002). Kantor (2000), for instance, argues students' performances differ according to the socio-economic level of students' families, and that their school experiences revolve around social relations with peers, lack of knowledge about secondary schooling, and the acknowledgment of secondary schooling as key for the future. In her ethnographic study in the city of Cordoba, Maldonado (2000) demonstrates that poor and middle-class students produce their social and class identities through their everyday relationships with peers.

My study contributes to the latter body of research by analysing how middle-class students effectively respond to the social and educational demands of their teachers and school. The next section presents my analytic tools.

Thinking with Bourdieu: game, habitus and cultural capital

According to Bourdieu (1993), social fields constitute 'games'[2] or 'competitive systems of social relations' that work according to their own particular rules or logic. Fields configure social spaces where there is competition and conflict around specific stakes (whether social, economic, or cultural capital), only acknowledgeable for those who participate in them. They generate their own values and imperatives but they need to be studied in their relationships with other social fields.

In this article, the concept of game of schooling is used to refer to students' everyday experiences at school, which are influenced by its academic and social organisation, and by the wider social field of state secondary schooling – with its institutional actors (such as the national and local government, and schools) and their capitals; their relationships; implicit and explicit codes; and 'objective regularities' (Lamaison 1986). Students play the game of schooling, drawing on unequal resources or 'cards' to deal with school's social and educational demands. They deploy strategies, which are the product of a 'feel for the game', or a practical mastery of the logic of this particular social game (Lamaison 1986). This sense of the game is unevenly distributed amongst players and it helps (or not) to make the best possible move to achieve what is at stake. Bourdieu refers to action as strategy to 'emphasize the interest orientation of human behaviour' (Swartz 1997, 67). He thinks 'of action as patterned and interest orientated at a tacit, pre-reflective level of awareness that occur through time' (Swartz 1997, 67).

Bourdieu defines habitus as 'socialised subjectivity', which stems from the participation of social agents in different social fields and tends to reproduce their objective structures or principles (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2002). Habitus is a productive and embodied matrix of dispositions, categories of perception and classification of practices. It is unconsciously acquired through socialisa-

tion in the family from early childhood. Habitus, however, is a multilayered concept that refers to individual, collective and field levels (Bourdieu 1992). As Reay (2004, 434) puts it: 'A person's individual history is constitutive of habitus, but so also is the whole collective history of family and class that the individual is a member of'. In other words, the individual habitus (H^i) is analytically distinct from, but intimately linked to, the social class habitus (H^c). The latter refers to the dispositions, views, feelings and practices rooted in similar locations in the social space (what Bourdieu calls social classes). However, habitus also operates at the level of the social field (H^f). Bourdieu argues that 'each field generates its own specific habitus' (Moi 1991, 1021), instilling in some of those who enter the game a system of perspectives and categories of classification and perception that are in tune with the played game or not. In other words, a social field is regulated by its own habitus (H^f), by sets of '*unspoken and unspeakable rules*' (Moi 1991, 1022; original emphasis). In my analysis, the concept of school habitus (H^f) refers to the dispositions, perspectives and practices objectified in students' unevenly distributed sense of the game in High Mountain, which help them to choose the best moves. However, the school habitus, unlike Bourdieu's definition and following Hatcher's (1998) interpretation, does not rule out actors' ability to identify some rules of the game, together with the performance of conscious, rational and strategic actions.

Regarding the concept of cultural capital, Bourdieu's definition has illuminated the deployment of a variety of cultural resources by middle-class students. He defines cultural capital as the set of resources or 'cards', which assumes different states: the embodied, the institutionalised and the objectified state (Bourdieu 1986). The most disguised form is the embodied state, which is the result of incorporation, through inculcation and assimilation over time. This kind of capital is acquired in an unconscious manner and is marked by the social conditions of its transmission and acquisition. According to Bourdieu, families and individuals' abilities, competences and embodied cultural resources are crucial to understanding educational success.

With regard to the relationships between the concepts, firstly, habitus and social fields cannot exist independently: 'the theory of habitus is incomplete without a notion of structure that makes room for the organized improvisation of agents' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2002, 19). As Grenfell and James (1998) argue, habitus focuses on the subjective, whilst field focuses on the objective aspects of social life. Secondly, habitus should be distinguished from cultural capital. Each term points to different analytic dimensions that need to be unpacked to better understand social practice and the reproduction or transformation of specific fields. This analytical distinction has the advantage of identifying students' 'feel for the game' and its rules from the kinds of resources (cultural, economic and/or social) they deploy while playing.

Having examined the theoretical tools used in the analysis, the next section describes the socio-economic and institutional contexts of my research as well as the key features of this ethnography.

Schooling the middle class in the city of Buenos Aires: the context and the study

The city of Buenos Aires has historically been one of the richest jurisdictions in Argentina. In 2006 it had the lowest level of poverty in the country (Llinás 2004). In terms of unemployment, although the city has been affected by the profound economic crisis of the late 1990s, its position was better compared with provincial and national means. In educational terms, in 2004 this city had one of the largest state and private educational systems. Regarding student performance, the city is also one of the best positioned in the country. Despite this generally favourable situation, this jurisdiction had high levels of educational inequalities.

The fieldwork was carried out during nine months (from mid-March 2004 until mid-December 2004) in a state secondary school, High Mountain.[3] It consisted of participant observation, with different degrees of participation; informal and formal semi-structured interviews with teachers and students; photo-elicitation interviews with students; the application of two surveys; and the examination of a range of public, semi-public and private texts (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). The data produced comprised observational notes, interview notes and transcripts, completed questionnaires, and documentation.

High Mountain was located in a middle-class neighbourhood at the northeast of the city. In 2004 the school offered nursery, primary, secondary and tertiary education. At secondary level, the school had a language specialist status. The school had generally low levels of educational failure. According to district and school authorities, teachers and students, High Mountain had a 'good' educational reputation – despite a general decline of educational standards. Teachers and students were aware that the local state education system was highly stratified and that High Mountain was less prestigious than the elite state schools, but more than those without entrance requirements.

High Mountain was quasi-selective. On the one hand, the school set a language entrance examination for those students who did not complete primary school there. Families must enrol their children long before the beginning of the academic year. On the other hand, the school informally excluded students who twice repeated a school year. This enrolment policy operated as means of producing a specific institutional identity that attracted middle-class families.

From the mid-1990s until 2004, High Mountain deployed a variety of strategies to respond to the recent impoverishment of middle-class families, and their growing inability to pay for extra-educational support for their children and deal with a more complex labour market. The school introduced new modules and activities that attempted to deal with increasing needs to get jobs after secondary schooling, and growing concerns regarding the transition to higher education.

High Mountain's teachers highlighted the positive personal qualities of the *chicos*[4] as a central feature of the school. All teachers agreed that students were 'good', 'nice', 'polite' people, and some highlighted that they were academically

able. From a Bourdieusian perspective, teachers perceived students as 'fitting in' to the school's fundamental values and expectations (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2002). Daniel, a French teacher, illustrated these views:

> I do believe that people in this school have a lot of potential, we work with average chicos […] they are not bad people, we don't have high levels of aggression towards teachers, you can work, they are friendly […]. Everybody says 'good morning', 'good afternoon'. […] You can quickly create ties with them, which doesn't happen in other schools where you have hostile relations with students […]

The following section examines how groups of middle-class students dealt with the everyday educational and social demands of the game of schooling.

Zafar; or how to play the game of schooling

Following Bourdieu (1989, 1992), the majority of middle-class students were good players who recognised what was at stake and what the game demanded and required. Evidence of third-year students' 'feel for the game' were the facts that nine out of 10 did not have previous experiences of educational failure during their secondary school, that nine out of 10 had not received any severe sanctions[5] from teachers or pastoral assistants, and that around 84%[6] of students passed to the next school year.

Following teachers' and students' comments and explanations, I have named this 'feel for the game' *zafar*. As mentioned above, the verb *zafar* has different meanings, including releasing from obligation; escaping to avoid risk; and evading something that exasperates or bothers you. *Zafar* is the term I use to refer to the underpinning principle that regulated middle-class students' educational engagement and, therefore, their strategies to deal with educational and behavioural institutional expectations. This logic of practice involved acute perceptions of teachers' behavioural and educational expectations without ruling out misbehaviour or low educational achievement.

On the one hand, teachers asserted that the majority of students wanted to *zafar*. Here, teachers used *zafar* to refer to the outcome of the game.[7] They agreed that, despite students' academic potential, the majority of the students were not interested in academic achievement. They simply wanted to pass and, in general, they did not want to distinguish themselves through academic achievement. However, they also stated that the majority of students wanted to go to university and agreed that their parents had similar aspirations for them. Camila, a female language teacher, and Liliana, a female history teacher, illustrated the teachers' views about students' lack of interest in academic excellence.

AM: How do students relate to marks? Are they competitive?

Camila: No. There are few exceptions. The majority only want a six [the minimum mark to pass an examination]. They want to *zafar* studying the least necessary. That's the ideal: the guy who gets six and does not study too much. There are a few competitive students. The key word

is *zafar*, that's the key word, *zafar* […] the *chico* who wants to learn or get high marks is rejected, treated as an alien, he's stupid.

Liliana: If you talk to them […] they say 'I don't understand but *zafo*? [do I pass anyway?] Well, we've convinced them that not understanding is OK, or it's cool to say that you don't understand anything. It's a social problem, it's a problem of a society that has certain standards […] The problem is that it's a society where all the values are related to the quickest *zafé*. It's the law of the minimum effort […] to make an effort is stupid, because it's really stupid, today the one who succeeds is the one who *zafa*. It's a serious concern.

Teachers agreed that students wanted to *zafar*, to avoid working hard while escaping from the risk of failing. In this view, High Mountain's students did not invest too much in the instructional game. According to teachers, this disposition towards *zafar* negatively affected their overall educational performance, learning and academic engagement. Despite this, the great majority of students were able to pass the school year.

Regarding High Mountain students' views, and similar to Seoane's (2003) findings in four secondary schools in the province of Buenos Aires, they shared certain dispositions and views towards the game of secondary schooling. With few exceptions, they did not aspire to have high marks and to excel academically. They had internalised that secondary schooling was not about successful educational performance. Their main objective was passing school years and getting the educational credential for studying whatever they liked afterwards. In one-to-one interviews, Marcela and Anto (female students) and Federico (a male student) illustrate the meanings of *zafar*:

AM: How do you manage studying?
Marcela: Well, I don't study much, really. […] I almost never study [smiling].
AM: But how did you pass school years? […]
Marcela: *Zafando.*[8]
AM: This school year you passed eight modules and you had to take exams of three modules.
Marcela: *Zafé* […], sometimes I used machetes [cheating], and there was a time when I did study Maths […] and I didn't study English […] What we see here I had learnt it before […] and in Civic Education we only had to do *trabajos prácticos* [special home assignments] and that was easy, [---] the Language teacher gave me and my best friend higher marks and more opportunities […] we are her favourite students […]
AM: What happened in the modules that you have to take exams? […]
Marcela: […] In these modules, you have to study. Maths is studying and practicing. There is no other way […] For accountancy you also have to study […]

Anto: Well, the Argentinean *zafa*, I mean, I say Argentinean people because I don't know people who live in other places […] well, I also include myself in this group […]

AM: But what does this mean at the school?

Anto: Well, if you pass with six, you try to get a five point fifty cheating, and well you hope that the teacher rounds your mark up so you could get a six.

AM: But is this common?

Anto: Well, yes, the day that we work in the school we say: 'we are so tired!' and we don't say 'cool, we've done something today'

AM: But why is that? [---]

Anto: Well, I don't know, well, many times it's much more interesting to spend time with friends and have a laugh, you know?

Federico: Well some people just try to get a six [the minimum score to pass] and nothing else, […] some are conscientious, I mean, the conscientious ones are those who study to try to understand […] I think that you have to find a balance between the two. On the one hand, I am interested in certain things and I want to learn them […]. But I am not interested in other modules, well, in these, I want to *zafar* with a six because I don't really have any option, do I?

As Marcela, Anto and Federico illustrate, *zafar* refers to a particular application of these meanings to the school context. Firstly, Marcela illustrates how *zafar* referred to a combination of dispositions, views and practices towards school work and modules. Like the majority of her peers, Marcela passed the school year and she took examinations in two modules in December.[9] From a Bourdieusian perspective, Marcela was able to mobilise different sorts of embodied cultural capitals (Bourdieu 1989). Examples of this were her ability to deal with the majority of modules; her lack of a need to study 'too much'; her likeability to teachers, which could be associated with cultural and social proximity; and previous knowledge accrued outside the school. She also engaged with specific school strategies (like cheating) in order to fulfil teachers' variable expectations and demands. However, when reflecting about the modules where she failed, Marcela stated that they were difficult and that she 'had to study'. In these cases, her wider strategies to deal with modules proved unsuccessful and she could not *zafar* or escape from the risk of failing.

Anto, on the other hand, inscribed *zafar* in a wider socio-cultural context. Like many teachers, Anto perceived *zafar* as a cultural feature that permeated institutions and individuals' dispositions and views across different fields. Here, she asserted that the overriding aim was trying to do the minimum to pass and not to invest much time and effort in studying and/or learning. Similar to some British and Argentinean research (Seoane 2003; Woods 1979), cheating was a frequent and legitimate strategy that many students frequently used with some teachers. In this case, *zafar* meant to release students from doing something that annoyed them and that they did not particularly like or enjoy as much as, for instance, 'chatting with friends'. In line with British analyses (Woods 1979), Anto illustrates many instances where middle-class students argued that 'being with friends', 'having a good time' and 'having a laugh' was the most important thing and what they enjoyed most at the school.

Here, Anto points to a tension between the school and teachers' expectations and peers' cultures. Moreover, Anto also narrates a common social story associated with *zafar*. Students many times referred to 'luck' and 'hope' when they talked about their performance in certain modules. However, rather than having just 'luck', students mobilised embodied cultural capital and engaged with different practices (such as cheating and making an effort in some modules) to respond to teachers' demands and expectations. Anto also identifies a general climate where effort, learning and studying was perceived mainly as obligation. In line with British socio-educational research (Hargreaves 1967; Woods 1990), boredom, tiredness, annoyance, and lack of enthusiasm with the majority of modules were frequent among third-year students. This concurs with teachers' views about middle-class students' underperformance and lack of interest in the majority of the modules.

Federico, however, offers a slightly different version of *zafar*, which was something he did when he disliked modules. In this view, *zafar* was a localised rather than a general disposition and view towards some aspects of the official curriculum and schoolwork. *Zafar* was necessary when students viewed modules as 'dull', 'useless', 'outdated', 'boring' or 'irrelevant' and/or when students disliked their teachers for being 'unfair', 'authoritarian', and/or a 'bad teacher'. Similar to Argentinean research about middle-class students' academic engagement (Seoane 2003), Federico illustrates how High Mountain students were aware that, in a variable number of modules, they only tried to get the minimum mark to simply pass. In a minority of modules, Federico studied and cared. *Zafar* refers here to avoid the risk of having to take examinations in December and/or March, and reflects a clear instrumental approach to some modules and aspects of school work.

Zafar, therefore, could be associated with an overarching approach to schooling and the majority of modules and/or with localised views and practices within particular modules. These examples show different aspects of this 'feel for the game'. As in Seoane's (2003) findings, High Mountain's students shared a common sense where *zafar* – with its detached view of the game of schooling; its instrumental approach to marks and some modules and its emphasis on passing rather than on learning – regulated their methods of dealing with educational performance and school work. Furthermore, unlike Bourdieu's emphasis on the non-rational and pre-reflexive nature of habitus, middle-class students were able to 'speak' about key features of the game of schooling, such as the overall centrality of passing over learning, the need to attune their practices in accordance to their teachers' variable educational and behavioural demands (which in some cases demanded study and work), and the tension between school and youth cultures.

Students' sense of the game was associated with a collective interpretative matrix to recognise different teachers' behavioural and educational expectations. In our conversations and their everyday interactions, middle-class students expressed a common understanding of who the 'bad' teachers were,

who were the 'best' ones, and who were 'good people' but were either unable to manage misbehaviour or be consistent in their methods of delivering lessons. For instance, students were able to recognise with whom they did not learn, who gave them little room for manoeuvre due to their authoritarian styles, and which lessons were 'challenging' and 'difficult' and demanded more attention and engagement; and those in which they could 'play silly' and misbehave, without the risk of receiving sanctions or low marks. Xole (a female student) and Yunco and Cuky (male students) illustrate this collective disposition to recognise a variety of behavioural and educational frames and students' ways of interacting with them:

Xole: One of the worst teachers is Mrs. Sarraceno […] We copy everything that is in the book into our notebook! I swear […] In her lessons, you have to pretend that you are working. You could be copying or writing a letter […] but the lesson cannot be chaos because she doesn't like that. […] She could sanction you if you misbehave. […] We know that to get higher marks we need to use colours when copying a drawing […]

Yunco: Well, she is the best teacher. Firstly, she knows how to teach. Secondly, […] she asks you questions and she makes you think all the time. […] She told us the rules at the beginning: 'The lessons have to be like this and, we can have a laugh too, we can enjoy ourselves but it has to be like this' […] she said: 'you talk when I say so, you have to raise your hand to participate, I don't like noise, when one person speaks, the rest listen, you have to listen to your classmate, I come here to give serious lessons, we arrive on time' […].

Cuky: With this teacher, we were *boludeando* [playing silly] all the time; and well […] we didn't pay attention. We knew that with this teacher we could *boludear*. We knew that nothing would happen. I mean, I don't know if she is a bad teacher because, maybe, if we had paid attention, we would have understood something […] but well, we didn't pay attention.[…]

As Cuky and Xole illustrate, this collective understanding did not rule out misbehaviour (both at a form class or individual level). Different British ethnographic research has shown how misbehaviour is part and parcel of secondary schooling (Woods 1979). In all the form classes where I worked, only a few students got serious sanctions. In this way, according to teachers and students, and my observations, episodes of misbehaviour were usual (especially with some teachers) but remained at levels that were acceptable for teachers with different and even antagonistic pedagogic styles. In other words, middle-class students had the 'feel for the game' and were able to deal with differential behavioural expectations without jeopardising their permanence at the school.

Moreover, students had an uneven educational performance during the school year. The school habitus *zafar* contributed to this. In the majority of the cases, marks were higher during the first term and lower during the second. In the final term, students asserted that only then did they make efforts to

compensate their previous low performance in an attempt to not take exami-
nations in December and/or March. Although they improved their educational
performance, a great number did not manage to pass all school modules before
the examination period of December. They took at least one partial examina-
tion in December. One strategy to deal with these partial examinations was
attending the non-compulsory tutorial lessons delivered by their teachers in
November. Students saw them as good opportunities to 'catch up' with some
topics and, mainly, to demonstrate their interest (whether genuine or not).
Having to take examinations in December and/or March was common and
perceived as part and parcel of secondary schooling.

The majority of middle-class students who had to take examinations in
December and/or March were able to mobilise different resources (economic
and cultural) to be able to pass enough modules to complete the school year.
Norberto illustrates how middle-class students dealt with examinations in
December and/or March:

AM: How many exams did you have to take?
Norberto: Four in December. I passed two in December and I only have two
            for March.
AM: How did you manage to pass these two?
Norberto: Well, *me puse las pilas* [I worked hard]. It wasn't that difficult
            though. I knew that I had to memorize to pass biology and I did so.
            I studied for history but not for 'Language and Literature' and for
            'Accountancy'. Language is easy and Accountancy is boring. […]
            I didn't study […] and I didn't pass in these modules.

As Norberto exemplifies, students made conscious efforts by studying or
memorising. Their strategies to cope with examinations in December and/or
March were based on their views on teachers' educational expectations, ways
of assessment, number of didactic units they needed to pass, and so forth.
Many studied with friends and attended private lessons during examination
time. In this way, students mobilised embodied dispositions, skills, views and
practices in order to achieve (when it was necessary), and passed the school
year. They adopted an instrumental approach to modules, and the great major-
ity of students succeeded. In this sense, they 'knew' how to play the game.
However, as Norberto and those who fail illustrate, the game was a risky one.

Why was *zafar* so good?

This paper has presented evidence of the lack of interest of middle-class
students in excelling academically. Here, I argue that the school habitus *zafar*
is fostered by key features of the game of secondary schooling in the City of
Buenos Aires: the nature of module assessment; the variability of educational
standards across subjects; the lack of accountability of teaching; the tension
between school and youth culture; the relationships between the field of
secondary schooling and higher education, and between the former and the

labour market. All these contribute, although in different ways, to configure *zafar* as the 'feel for the game' of the majority of middle-class students.

Regarding the game of secondary schooling, the fragmented nature of module assessment and some aspects of teaching seemed to contribute to a segmented appropriation of knowledge and an instrumental approach towards marks. With regard to students' assessment, normative frameworks defined it as on-going (*evaluación permanente*). Academic performance was formally recorded per trimester, and per module. As mentioned above, to pass a module, students' needed to have a minimum average performance (which disguised variable learning over time). If they had a lower performance, they had to take partial examinations in December of the didactic units they failed. This fragmentation of assessment promoted a view on learning that fractured knowledge, students' engagement and learning into discrete units of equal value. However, to pass a school year, students' overall performance was assessed according to the total number of failed modules (whether in the current school year or in previous ones). In this way, annual performance was evaluated without any weighting of the relevance of modules,[10] or any consideration of the global performance and/or progress. In other words, assessment implied both a segmented approach to knowledge and learning, and a summative view on performance. The nature of assessment propelled students to see learning as fragmented and educational performance as synonym of the annual average score per module. These views promoted *zafar* and an instrumental approach to knowledge.

Another important aspect of secondary schooling linked to *zafar* was the lack of accountability of what was taught and how it was assessed. Schools, head teachers and colleagues had no instruments with which to make teachers' work, pedagogy and ways of interacting with students accountable.[11] In terms of curriculum, for instance, a 'secret garden' similar to that of the United Kingdom before the implementation of the National Curriculum (McCulloch 2000) operated in the city's state secondary schools in a variable number of modules. Some teachers work collectively in the selection and updating of common curricular contents and ways of assessment. Other teachers still assessed students' ability to memorise rather than to reason. Several teachers worked alone, followed old programmes and did not interact with colleagues to discuss pedagogic and/or curricular issues. These variable educational standards and teachers' academic expectations also contributed to an instrumental view of school modules and learning and to *zafar*.

The dominance of the 'feel for the game' *zafar* could also be linked to contemporary tension between the school culture (or habitus) and youth culture (Tenti Fanfani 2003; Youdell 2006).[12] On the one hand, during the past three decades, there have been profound changes in the relationship between school culture and youth cultures that have deeply undermined the legitimacy of key aspects of the former (such as the predominance of reading, the need for systematic work, the centrality of academic knowledge, and the need to postpone satisfactions) (Tenti Fanfani 2000). On the other hand,

middle-class students attempted to define who they were while trying to sustain the balance of passing the school year without 'losing face' (Goffman 1990) or their good reputation with peers.[13] Romina illustrates how this tension was part and parcel of students' everyday experience

> Something that I don't like is that *chicos* who have a lot of exams to take in December and March, well, they are considered cool. […] Or well, if you smoke you are a rebel. Well, if you don't have to take exams, you are a *traga* [people who swallow everything], that's bullshit, I don't have to take any exams but it was difficult and I just had enough marks to pass, not in all the modules, but in maths, physics and chemistry, in accountancy, it was difficult. I am not a *traga* who spends all the time studying. That's a lie. Well, if you have to take a lot of exams, you are really cool […] that's how it is, maybe those who have to take exams don't think that is cool and they probably feel bad about that, but the rest, the rest thinks that if you have to take exams and you smoke you are really cool.

Here Romina signals that having low educational performance over the school year was perceived as 'cool', 'rebellious' and collectively desirable. In other words, middle-class students wanted to invest in the game of secondary schooling as long as they were not labelled *traga*, a person who swallows everything and who studies 'all the time'. The *tragas* were unable to balance the school's obligations and peers' group expectations (within and outside the school). These different social worlds had different stakes and students interpreted them as far apart. *Zafar* was also a juggling act between these social worlds.

The school habitus *zafar* could also be linked to changes in the value of secondary school certificates, mainly triggered by the recent expansion of this educational level. In the city, the school leaving aged was raised to 18 in 2000. According to Tenti Fanfani (2003), this has transformed the social meaning of secondary schooling into citizenship education (universal and non-selective education), undermining its historic selective and elitist nature. When a level of education becomes universal, a devaluation of its credentials in relation to the labour market takes place (Bourdieu 1992). In the Argentinean labour market of the late 1990s and early 2000s – characterised by high levels of unemployment, sub-employment, and informality – this devaluation was particularly striking, affecting different social groups (including the 'loser' sections of the middle classes) and, in particular, young people (Minujín and Anguita 2004). High Mountain middle-class students asserted that completing secondary schooling was not enough to get jobs. In line with international and local academic research (Baudelot and Leclerq 2008; Filmus et al. 2001), students were aware that secondary schooling was more necessary than in the past, but not enough to guarantee social and occupational inclusion. *Zafar*, as a school habitus, was also promoted by this state of the field of secondary schooling.

Zafar, this collective interpretative matrix, could also be linked to the particular articulation that secondary schooling and higher education has in Argentina, where around 50% of young people were enrolled in higher education institutions in 2001 (Garcia de Fanelli 2006). During the past century, numbers

of students in higher education have continuously increased. Argentina's gross enrolment rate is among the highest in Latin America. High Mountain students expressed their vocal preference for state universities. Access to non-university institutions and to state universities is open. In 2006, the latter encompassed 82% of the students (Garcia de Fanelli 2006). Open access meant that any secondary school graduate was able to enrol in any degree without any further entrance requirement. This also fostered *zafar*. Better marks were not necessary to continue education and to follow preferred educational paths.

Concluding remarks: *zafar*, so far?

This article has shown that, in High Mountain, middle-class students were able to recognise the objective instructional and social requirements and constraints of the game of schooling. The great majority were successful players who adopted an instrumental approach to modules and to their educational performance. They did not strive for better marks and instead were only interested in passing school year. This sense of the game, however, was not infallible and it was unevenly distributed among groups and individuals in the school (Lamaison 1986).

This paper has identified a diversity of factors shaping *zafar* both within and beyond the boundaries of state secondary schooling in the city. Amongst them: the fragmented nature of assessment, the existence of a 'secret garden', the tension between school and youth culture, the recent expansion of secondary schooling, the existence of a fragmented labour market, and a growing and open higher educational field.

The term *zafar* encapsulates a collective interpretative matrix that propelled students to play the game of schooling. However, it could be argued that *zafar* also hampered middle-class students' secondary education. Firstly, *zafar* helped middle-class students to cope with teachers who had a wide range of pedagogic frames, delivered more or less updated and relevant curricula, applied differential assessment methods, and were not accountable to their parents, colleagues and the school's authorities. In this sense, *zafar* was part of the game played by many adults too. Several teachers, according to many of their colleagues, students and my observations, did the minimum to fulfil their professional roles and, for instance, delivered outdated curricula, arrived late for lessons, and worked in isolation to deal with students' pedagogic or behavioural problems. In other words, *zafar* implied that students accepted what was going in their schools and did not learn much in a number of modules.

Secondly, *zafar* together with lack of curricular accountability could diminish middle-class students' future ability to engage with university's demands. As mentioned before, the fragmented nature of secondary schooling implied unequal educational standards for different schools. Having the same educational degree does not imply having acquired relevant dispositions, skills and knowledge to deal with higher educational demands (Bourdieu 1992). Although

High Mountain had a 'good' reputation in the local state system, there were no data on how its students perform in university life. The 'secret garden' of curriculum and the lack of accountability impeded collective and public assessments of what knowledge was privileged, how it was taught and assessed. According to Argentinean studies, transition to higher education is not smooth and levels of completion are low (de Wit et al. 2005). In this scenario, is *zafar* going to help High Mountain middle-class students to deal with higher education's demands? Although their participation and engagement in higher education would depend on numerous circumstances – such as their family capital, their economic participation, the nature of the chosen degree, and so forth – *zafar* could weaken students' future ability to play the game of higher education. According to Argentinean quantitative research, the participation of young people in higher education is associated with better occupational chances (Kritz 2003). In this sense, being able to complete a higher education degree could contribute to (although not determine or predict) students' future participation in a highly differentiated labour market (in terms of legal protection, working conditions, levels of income, and degrees of connection with the so-called global economy). As mentioned above, the 'loser' sections of the middle-class have been particularly vulnerable to economic and social changes. High Mountain families' and their children's strategies to reproduce or improve their social positions would be deployed in changing and risky scenarios. It remains to be seen if *zafar*, as an overarching approach to academic engagement, will contribute to or counteract those strategies.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. Names of people and institutions are pseudonyms.
2. Bourdieu's use of the term 'game' differs from that of some game theorists in the field of economy. He criticises many of them for their neoclassical underpinnings and lack of acknowledgement of the historical and political nature of the preferences invoked by players (Bourdieu 2005).

3. The school year runs from March to March.
4. The word *chicos* is widely used by adults and young people. *Chicos* is plural and is in masculine. However, this word could refer to both boys and girls or only to a collective of boys.
5. There were different sanctions: *firmas* (signature), *apercibimiento* (warning), and *suspensión* (suspension), which I call 'severe sanction'.
6. Statistics, as Bourdieu asserts (Lamaison 1986), reflect a regularity of the game of secondary school as it was played by teachers and students.
7. Teachers and students used *zafar* to refer to set of practices and actions, and to their outcomes. The former and the latter are analytically distinctive aspects of the game of schooling. Here, I use *zafar* to refer to students' school habitus.
8. *Zafar* is an infinite verb. *Zafé* and *zafo* are the first-person singular in past tense and in the simple present, respectively. *Zafa* is the third-person singular. *Zafando* is the present continuous of the verb *zafar*.
9. Students pass a module only if they had an annual average score of six out of 10, and if, in the last trimester, the average mark was six or higher. If a student had an annual average score lower than six and higher than four or a score equal to or higher than six but lower than six in the last trimester, they had to sit examinations in December for the didactic sub-units or trimesters in which they got a mark lower than six. Moreover, those who got an annual average score lower than four and those who failed in December should sit examinations in March. A student passes an academic year if: they pass all modules that school year; or if they have failed a maximum of two modules during the current and/or previous school years.
10. Modules were very different in terms of number of hours, status and integration.
11. The *Estatuto del Docente* (Teachers' Statute) and various modifications regulated recruitment, payment and working conditions.
12. British ethnographers have also identified the ability of middle-class students of getting by while appearing not to make any effort (see Youdell 2006).
13. British research offers evidence of this 'juggling act' (Francis, Skelton, and Read 2010; Jackson 2006).

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