# **Social fragmentation and the public-private school divide: the case of high-achieving high schools in Mexico City**

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# **Abstract**

This study explores views on social fragmentation amongst participants from public and private high-achieving high schools in Mexico City. Whilst issues relating to social fragmentation have recently received more attention in Mexico, there is a lack of research in relation to the existing divisions amongst both school types. The paper aims to expose, through a limited sample size, some of the implications the public-private school divide represents for achieving social cohesion. From a framework of social fragmentation and private schooling in Mexico and drawing on data from semi-structured interviews, the study’s findings discuss the key characteristics of high-achieving high schools, participants’ conflicted views of the devalued place of public education and the current barriers for wider social interaction amongst public and private high schools. Some points for further research are suggested in the last section.

**Key words**

Private schooling; social fragmentation; public-private divide; social interaction; social cohesion.

# **Introduction**

We live in a polarised world and Mexico is not the exemption. Drawing on data from semi-structured interviews, this paper explores views on social fragmentation amongst participants from public and private high-achieving high schools in Mexico City. It aimsto expose, through a limited sample size, some of the implications the public-private school divide represents for achieving social cohesion in a society that is highly segregated by ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Although the paper focuses on a particular context, the public-private divide in education and the prevalent negative perception of public education exist in many different contexts around the world.

In order to understand the role played by the public-private school divide on the current social fragmentation, it is necessary to focus on a specific age-range of students and consider both students and tutors’ voices. Whilst schoolchildren might be unaware of the social fragmentation around them, older students might be already too familiarised with it. The reason to focus on high-achieving urban high schools, catering to middle and middle-upper class teenagers, is that the abyss between the opposite sides of the spectrum (schools for the upper and lower classes) is so profound that a first exploration within the middle ground seems to be a more feasible starting point. The research question guiding the study is what are participants’ views towards social fragmentation and the current public-private school divide?

Issues relating to social fragmentation have recently received more attention in Mexico. Research has been done especially in relation to the prevailing racism amongst multi-ethnic groups (Oehmichen, 2007) as well as the discrimination of indigenous children in urban schools (Horbath and Gracia, 2018). Comprehensive research projects have emerged looking at the socio-racial discrimination in Mexico (https://discriminacion.colmex.mx). More recently, the social protests of Black Live Matters in the US have sparked a heated debate on social media about the classism and racism prevailing in Mexico. However, there is a lack of research in relation to the existing social division amongst elite urban private schools and the rest of the school system. This paper aims to expose some of the implications this fracture represents for achieving social cohesion within a limited sample size of high-achieving, high school students from middle-class backgrounds.

First, the paper presents a brief contextual background about the Mexican education system with a particular focus on its upper-secondary education (hereafter USE). This is followed by an exploration of the literature on social fragmentation and private schooling in Mexico. Then the methodology of the study is presented. Afterwards, the findings section analyses the voices of students and tutors in public and private high-achieving high schools. The last section discusses the barriers to social interaction amongst public and private high-achieving schools and suggests some points for further research.

# **The Mexican education system**

The national education system consists of three main levels, namely, basic education (comprised of preschool, primary and secondary), USE and HE. The basic education comprises twelve years and its curriculum is articulated and sequenced from preschool to lower secondary (Chuquilin and Zagaceta, 2017). The national education system is mainly public as the governments (federal and local) contribute with 75.7% of the educational funding and the private sector with 24.3% (INEE, 2019). It is also highly centralised as the federal government determines the national curriculum for basic education in both public and private schools; organises and delivers pre and in-service teacher training; establishes school terms; produces, updates and distributes national textbooks and oversees the overall evaluation of the system (de Ibarrola, 2012). Educational standards are evaluated through national and international standardised tests. Students sit the National Plan for Learning Evaluation (PLANEA) in the last years of primary, secondary and USE. For this paper, two main results stand out from a recent evaluation. First, for every 100 students entering primary education, only 56 are able to complete USE. Second, the lower the economic capital of the families and the lower the educational level of the mothers, as well as when both parents speak an indigenous language, the results of students are more deficient (INEE, 2017).

USE is characterised by its diversity. It lasts three years and it is typically for students aged 15 to 17. It is compulsory since 2011 although this was originally planned as a phased implementation until the academic year of 2020-21. There are three different educational models. **[Insert table 1 here].** Model 1 offers general education (57.7% enrolment). Model 2 (bivalent) offers a technological specialisation of students’ own choice (41.7% enrolment), and Model 3, offers vocational education (0.6% enrolment) (INEE, 2016). Each model provides different certificates for graduates. Graduates from Model 1 receive a bachelor’s certificate. Graduates from Model 2 receive a bachelor’s certificate in addition to a professional title of their chosen technical specialisation, and graduates from Model 3 receive a diploma of technical professional Although, in theory, the three types of leaving certificate allow enrolment into HE, the three models do not equally guarantee the necessary knowledge to approve university entrance examinations (de Ibarrola, 2012). Therefore, apart from clear curricular differentiations across the models, there are also different pedagogical approaches within them as well as different reputations associated to each model. USE funding can come from four different sources: the federal and local governments, the private sector and the (public) National Autonomous University of Mexico (hereafter UNAM). High schools funded by the governments can offer the three models whereas high schools funded by the private sector and UNAM mainly offer Model 1. Similar to the rest of the education system, the biggest share of students attend public high schools (47% state, 21% federal and 12% UNAM’s own high schools) whereas 19% of students attend private high schools (INEE, 2019). Although enrolment to this level has increased since 2012, USE is the level with the highest dropout rate in the national education system (14.3%) as well as low graduation (63%) (INEE, 2014). This shows that those who access and accomplish this level are already advantaged regardless of the educational model and type of institution they attend. However, there is considerable variation in relation to the educational opportunities, resources and support provided across institutions, which mainly depend on students’ socioeconomic background. Ortega (2015) found that compared to better-off students, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds tend to apply to less selective institutions (generally from Model 3), have less access to information about the admission process and their access and graduation rates are less efficient. The most demanded public high schools are those belonging to the two largest public universities, UNAM and the National Polytechnic University (hereafter IPN) as both are well-reputed institutions regionally that have greatly contributed to social mobility nationally.

Enrolment differs across institutions, as there are, in average, 1,173 students in UNAM high schools; 1,108 students in federal high schools; 235 students in state high schools, and 173 students in private high schools (INEE, 2019). Students from the metropolitan area of Mexico City aiming to attend a public high school need to sit the National Upper Secondary Education Entrance Exam (EXANI-I), although, applicants to UNAM’s own high schools sit the institution’s own version of the exam. Ortega (2015) explains that within the metropolitan area of Mexico City, there are nearly 650 different choices of public high schools. Prospective students from both public and private lower-secondary schools can apply for up to twenty different USE public options. On the other hand, private high schools can be regulated either by the federation via the Ministry of Education (SEP) or by UNAM through its Incorporated System. Private high schools regulated by UNAM pay an incorporation fee that allows them to graduate with UNAM’s leaving certificate and follow the same curricula as UNAM own high schools with the possibility of adding extra content.

The next section, explores the literature on social fragmentation and private schooling in Mexico in order to discuss their interplay across a small sample of high-achieving public and private high schools in Mexico City in the findings section.

# **Social fragmentation and private schooling in Mexico**

According to Saraví (2015), social fragmentation refers to the coexistence of worlds that are social and culturally distant and isolated. It occurs when different social groups do not benefit from the same opportunities, which results in compartmentalised lifestyles, with the popular sectors generally positioned at the fringe with considerable risks of social exclusion (Saravi, 2009). Social fragmentation in Mexico has historical roots. As an ethnically diverse country, Mexico has sixty-eight ethnolinguistic groups that derive in 364 diverse dialects (Schmelkes, 2013). Spanish is one of the national languages and the most widely spoken. Stavenhagen (1992) explains that this ethno-cultural diversity has represented an unresolved issue for the nationalist debate. According to him, although originally the model of the nation-state was defined by the *criollo* upper class of Spanish ancestry, eventually the mix across Indigenous and Spanish (labelled as *mestizos*) came to occupy the socioeconomic space and thus became to be identified with the national mainstream. However, as Stavenhagen (1992) explains, the promise of a racial mixture created by *mestizaje* did not materialise at the social nor the political level. The reason for this was that the assimilation process of *mestizaje* aimed for a supposedly homogenous society through the annihilation of our indigenous past (Moreno Figueroa, 2020). The consequences of this are still prevalent in current Mexico. According to Moreno Figueroa and Saldívar (2016), the official national ideology of *mestizaje* continues to justify current racial exclusion and privilege by reproducing old racial hierarchies. Therefore, the myth of *mestizaje* has actually limited social mobility and hindered social interaction amongst different social groups (Krozer, 2019). Race, as a crucial factor for social exclusion and privilege in Mexico, is just starting to be slowly socially acknowledged and investigated. Individuals’ skin tone has historically been associated with their origins and destinies. Recent research has demonstrated that darker skin tones are more frequent amongst lower socioeconomic backgrounds whereas lighter skin tones are more prevalent amongst wealthier groups, which translates in multiple social disadvantages and discrimination for the former group and multiple advantages and privileges for the latter (Solís, Avitia and Güémez, 2020). Therefore, social division and exclusion has widely affected daily life in Mexico, which is characterised by both physical and virtual social boundaries. According to Bayón and Saraví (2013), different social classes reject any encounter in public spaces with ‘the other’, which generates a progressive ignorance in relation to the city as a whole. According to Cantle (2016: 477), these ‘parallel lives’ occur when people have no contact with others creating thus wider fear and intolerance. As Christensen (2009: 22) explains, ‘strong “us/them” demarcations define both old and new cleavages’. These strong demarcations are not confined only to public spaces but also exist across different social spheres. For example, Ramirez and Ziccardi (2008) explain that discriminatory practices are evident in the labour market as well as in the access to public services of diverse quality according to one’s social, economic and ethnic backgrounds and place of residence. However, my argument is that unlike other public spaces and services, the school as a social institution is one of the few instances within the public sphere where interaction amongst different sociocultural groups could deliberately be sought. However, traditionally this has not been the case. The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean shows a high degree of school segregation in Latin America (Arcidiácono, 2014). Regionally, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds attend in their majority public schools.

According to Torres Septién (1997), private schooling in Mexico represents a clear example of social reproduction as it has been a vehicle for affluent individuals to maintain and improve their privileged status by keeping senior positions and better salaries both in public and private jobs. Private provision of schooling in Mexico has a long history. Before Independence, schooling was mainly in the hands of the Catholic Church. According to Vázquez y Vera (1970), with the formation of the new country after independence, public education served to form a new citizen according to the new political order, which created tensions between liberal and conservatives. Torres Septién (1997) explains that with a liberal government on power trying to control basic education from a secular perspective, Catholics tried to protect teaching spaces where their values could be transmitted. Between the 50s and 70s, with the population growth challenging the abilities of the state to secure public education for all and with the need for more schools, the state adopted a more lenient approach towards private educational providers (Torres Septién, 1997). Therefore, as Vázquez y Vera (1970) explains, the state has never managed to have the monopoly of education and failed, despite their desire, to achieve national unity through schooling. Decades later during the 80s and 90s, Aboites (2012) explains that a series of simultaneous events profoundly affected education in Mexico. Those governments started to establish agreements with new national actors (e.g. the National Confederation of Employers and the Chambers of Commerce) and international organisations (e.g. International Monetary Fund; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) putting an end to sixty years of accelerated expansion of public education free of market and religious forces (Aboites, 2012). This resulted in the emergence of different low-budget private schools coexisting with elite private and public schools. Therefore, as Narodowski (2008) shows, Latin American education systems have increasingly accommodated new providers that coexist and operate within the regulations of the state giving thus rise to educational quasi-markets. These quasi-markets have resulted on highly homogenous schools in relation to students’ socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds (Quiroz, Dari and Cervini, 2018). Consequently, the introduction of market forces in education has increased social fragmentation (Gibson and Asthana, 2000) as well as socio-spatial divisions (Warrington, 2005). In the specific case of Mexico, Solís (2013) found an increased level of horizontal stratification as students from affluent backgrounds not only attend with ever more frequency private schools at all educational levels but, by doing so, also increase their likelihood of educational progression compared to their less-affluent counterparts. Consequently, what Apple calls ‘racialisation of education policy’ is also prevalent in the Mexican context as differential education results are ‘naturally’ raced and classed (Apple, 1999). According to Saraví (2015), education is an example of unequal social inclusion as schooling of poor quality can aggravate existing social inequalities and create new ones. My argument is that the solid boundaries created around elite private schools help to feed social fragmentation and discriminatory practices that affect other social spheres beyond the school itself.

# **Methodology**

Tutors and students from high-achieving public and private high schools in Mexico City were approached via the head teacher or a senior member of staff. An annual survey of the best private high schools in the city commissioned by a national newspaper facilitated the selection of private institutions (*Reforma,* 2017). The newspaper selects the evaluators and sets the evaluation criteria. Evaluators are chosen amongst senior management, lecturers and professional services from both public and private universities in Mexico City. They ranked 84 private high schools within the city and its metropolitan area according to students’ knowledge, performance, responsibility, independence, ICT skills and English proficiency. Five out of the seven participating private high schools scored within the top twenty institutions. A small number of highly demanded UNAM and IPN public high schools were also invited to take part. Born and raised in Mexico City, within a white, middle-class family, I was aware, from an early age, of the many mexicos coexisting within Mexico from years on end. My initial private and later public education allows me to circumnavigate different environments, which helped during the recruitment and data collection processes.

In total, 24 semi-structured interviews were conducted in three public and seven private high schools. Participants included 17 students (eleven females and six males) recently graduated or in their last year of high school and seven members of staff (three females and four males in various job roles and with a ranging work experience of two to 23 years). **[Insert table 2 here]** A limitation was that school gatekeepers in the majority of participating schools selected the students for interview. This selection was based on untold criteria, most likely, students’ good grades and behaviour or alignment with project brief. This might have led to an uncritical exploration of students’ own prejudice against social fragmentation. Participation from students and tutors was voluntary, anonymised and consensual. Ethical approval was obtained prior data collection from the author’s adscription institution and shared with participating institutions. The topics explored through the semi-structured interviews included students’ valorisation of the education they receive, stigma attached to public education and their views on the current social divide between public and private schools. Participants’ skin colour and its effects on social stratification was not explicitly part of the interview schedule nor students’ demographics questionnaire although, in few instances, allusions to it did emerge during the interviews. Additionally, tutors’ interviews explored current barriers for wider social interaction between public and private high schools. The data collection period ran at three intervals between May 2017 and December 2019. Interviews lasted in average 40 minutes. Only one interview to foreign tutors working in a private high school was conducted in English; the rest were conducted in Spanish and partially translated into English by the author. Interviews were fully recorded and transcribed. Thematic analysis was undertaken using NVivo 12.

Although all the participating private high schools offer scholarships to a number of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds with a good GPA, the socioeconomic composition of their student body tends to be more homogenous. On the contrary, UNAM and IPN public high schools are more heterogeneous regarding their students’ socioeconomic background. Generally, less prestigious public high schools tend to cater for less affluent students (Saraví, Bayón and Azaola, 2020). An analysis of students’ demographics collected prior the interviews shows that all had a middle-class background irrespectively of whether they attended a public or private institution. **[Insert table 3 here]**

# **Findings**

## *High-achieving high schools*

All participating institutions claimed to provide high quality education. All had different reasons to defend their right to be considered a high-achieving institution. Some mentioned their long tradition and prestige. In relation to their staff, many were long-serving, highly qualified and recipients of constant in-service teacher training. In relation to their academic content, schools offer a vast curriculum and execute recurrent content reforms. Other reasons for having high academic standards were their high expectations for students, exceptional school facilities and graduates’ access to and achievement in good universities. A senior member of staff in a public institution explained:

IPN has worked very hard to keep up our reputation. We have very tight teaching requirements, teaching training is permanent, every semester we establish formative activities and that makes teachers be well prepared for their job [OT1SS]

Many students from private institutions mentioned their school’s ranking in the newspaper’s annual survey as a sign of good quality and many explained how studying in that institution granted them some privileges. A privately educated student explained:

Getting an offer from that university was easy for me simply because I come from this High School. I did the entrance exam and even got a scholarship. My cousin who studied in a not-very-well-known high school, struggled a lot more, she does not have a scholarship and has a better GPA than mine [PG2S1]

Another marker of high-achievement is the academic and emotional support that students get at school. Students in both types of schools mentioned that, overall, they feel that tutors are involved and care about their learning. They explained that they can ask questions both inside and outside the classroom and some students mentioned that with some tutors they can establish stronger links. This shows a striking difference with the feeling of ‘devalued inclusion’ found amongst students in not-high-achieving public high schools (Saraví, Bayón and Azaola, 2020). Although participating students do feel supported by their tutors, students in one of UNAM’s own high schools mentioned that tutor absenteeism is sometimes problematic and that the education they receive could be more innovative. For example, they would like to have English as a medium-of-instruction as some private high schools do. Language of instruction at both UNAM and IPN high schools is entirely in Spanish (see Table 2). Although both institutions do offer a rich variety of foreign languages as extra curricula, English is not used to teach academic subjects. The acknowledgement of privilege about the education received was more prevalent amongst privately educated students. However, this was not consistent amongst all students. As a student explained:

In this school I’ve seen people that do not struggle to pay the school fees and do not appreciate the education they get; don’t appreciate their luck and how privileged they are to attend this excellent school [PG4S2]

## *Devalued public education*

With respect to participants’ views on whether public education in Mexico is socially devalued, there are different aspects to consider. First, most participants made a distinction between different educational levels. For them teachers’ absenteeism, lack of teacher training and poor salaries are key factors affecting the quality of education especially at primary and secondary levels. Although many participants highlighted that not all public primary and secondary schools are of bad quality, they lamented that teachers on those educational levels often have to fight political battles that distract them from being truly commitment to their teaching. A senior member of staff in a private institution explained:

Three generations ago, the public school was an option; schools used to cater their catchment area, which means that rich and poor children used to attend the same school and teachers were socially valued figures. Nowadays, that is not the case anymore [PG3SS]

Secondly, regarding the quality on offer, participants also made a distinction between UNAM and IPN own high schools and less-achieving public high schools, which shows the hierarchical divisions within USE. As already mentioned, the most demanded public high schools are those of UNAM and IPN. Interestingly, tutors in public and private high schools identified that, in order to value the high quality education provided in public high schools, these should ‘blow their own trumpet’ and show with pride their achievements in order to help decrease the general negative perception associated to them. For example, not only relying on their high demand and status but also adopting a less inward-looking approach and openly showing their own capabilities:

Let’s talk more to the outside in order to get stronger inside [OT1SS]

It is necessary to show the good things of public schools in order to elevate [their reputation] and show their advantages, benefits and qualities [PG1T]

However, although participants generally praised the quality of UNAM and IPN’s high schools, some students from these institutions mentioned that, compared to privately educated students, discrimination still occurs when graduates from public institutions search for jobs. Other participants highlighted that often the same tutor might teach both at public and private high schools, which makes it difficult to differentiate the teaching quality between these institutions because many share the same tutors. However, one tutor working at a private institution questioned the supposed quality of all private high schools:

In many fee-paying schools, the teachers cannot fail their students. Some friends of mine who work in private schools say that they must pass their students because they pay, something like ‘you pay, you pass’. So, there are some ‘mickey-mouse’ private high schools. Despite their reputation and number of students, they do not learn anything [PG1T]

Different discipline rules mark clear differences between public and private high schools. For example, UNAM own high schools are more flexible compared to private ones when it comes to students’ physical appearance and attendance. Another important and sought-after difference is that students at UNAM own high schools can directly transfer to undergraduate studies at the same institution if they graduate within four years and achieve the threshold required for their chosen degree whereas privately educated students who want to study a degree in UNAM need to pass an entry examination. A senior member of staff in a private institution explained:

Of those who study HE in Mexico, a lot of them find it really hard to get into UNAM. Students have to get a very high percentage in the test to actually get into UNAM. So being at the school is a disadvantage for them in terms of that [PG4SS]

Thirdly, there was also the view that a good education depends upon the student not the institution. According to participants from both type of institutions, what counts is students’ own commitment to learning regardless of whether they attend a public or private institution.

Overall, students from both public and private high schools considered that everyone should be entitled to a good quality education regardless of their socioeconomic background. Students did not question the existence of private schools but said that both types should be of equal quality. For them, having public education of good quality could help to avoid disparities later in life especially because the majority of the population attends public schools. According to students, people deserve the same opportunities. Students highlighted the need to increase teachers’ commitment to their students’ learning, their precarious salaries and the importance of acquiring education of good quality as a way to improve the national economic growth. A privately educated student explained:

We all deserve the same education, especially if you come from a lower social background. I think that every generation should receive a better education than the previous one. They should get something better to get out of this poverty cycle [PG4S2]

## *Social interaction with ‘others’*

When discussing the possibilities of interaction amongst public and private high school students an appetite in favour of this was overall found amongst participants. Students saw it as an interesting initiative that could allow learning and exchanges amongst them. According to students, the benefits of such interactions could be getting to know different ideas, seeing things in a different light and finding different solutions to shared problems. They mentioned that there are intelligent students in other high schools and allowing social mixing through schooling could increase students’ learning opportunities. Other students saw it as a way of comparing different methods and recognising the hard work of high-achieving high schools, which could eventually help to rise the quality of less-achieving schools.

Although tutors also acknowledged the need for more social interaction across institutions, some focused on the practical complexities to achieving this. For example, one tutor mentioned that the curricular differences amongst high school programmes would make interaction challenging and he favoured a systematic and formalised scheme if interaction across schools was to be implemented. Other tutors were more flexible and, similar to students, saw it as an opportunity to share different viewpoints. One tutor explained that whilst students generally focus on superficial things such as acquiring garments and electronic gadgets, a wider interaction amongst different high schools could allow them to have an academic exchange as they all have interesting contributions to make regardless of their social background. By interacting always with like-mindedpeople, students cannot understand what others need as well as their opinions. A tutor in a private institution explained:

Although we cover the same curriculum, other schools with different social, economic and cultural circumstances can see the same thing from a different perspective and we could be learning from these different perspectives [PG1T]

Although students overall showed positive reactions to the idea of wider social interaction across institutions, whilst discussing this in more detail, more nuanced interpretations were exposed. For example, in relation to students’ own schooling experiences, some privately educated students recognised that they preferred to pay school fees in order to have education of good quality and be able to meet like-minded people and make friends for life. They also mentioned obtaining a certain set of values promoted by their schools such as respect, tolerance, non-discrimination and equality that help them when the school organises community work such as literacy workshops for domestic workers (one of their few opportunities for interacting with people from different social backgrounds). According to them, although students have the same learning abilities and the school helps everyone to achieve the same educational level, not all students have the same financial capacity to socialise. A privately educated student explained:

Clearly, not everyone has the monetary means to go out with those who spend a lot but there are very nice and comprehensive girls that despite that they befriend them. I get along with some of them and obviously, you don’t arrange to go to the most expensive restaurant, therefore, we go for some *tacos* and we chat [PG1S1]

Privately educated students’ exposure to social diversity mainly comes from either their international classmates living in Mexico who have different cultures and religions or from their own educational experiences abroad. Although Mexico is ethno-culturally very rich, many students find more variety abroad than at home because it is whilst abroad, or through their international classmates, that they come face-to-face with diversity.

There is a dark-skinned student in our school that comes, I think, from Nigeria and the girls here treat her very well, they get excited and say ‘wow, a different person’. There is also another student from Asia, again a different girl… I studied one year in Washington D.C. and met different people, like children of migrant workers… I had to adapt, as I was not prepared for that experience [PG1S1]

The majority of the privately educated students recognised that there is little social mixing in their own schools and outside school there are usually no possibilities of having meaningful interactions with people from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds.

When discussing social interaction within public high schools, students mentioned that, in general, everybody gets along well and that only few people do not interact with others. Some students who previously studied in private schools found more discrimination in their former schools. Although students from private schools talked about respect, tolerance and solidarity towards students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, some recognised that a potential influx of students from different backgrounds to their school would represent a revolt because the majority of them live in a protected bubble. For example, parents in some of the participating private high schools have previously fought against including boys (in a same-sex school) and children with special educational needs in another school. When asked to a privately educated student whether schools should promote wider social interaction with people from different socioeconomic backgrounds, her response was:

At school you are in your comfort zone, with like-minded people, but in life we’ll have to work with people who think differently and who come from a lower socioeconomic background, life is like that, and we have to learn [PG1S2]

According to privately educated students, cases of bullying do exist especially against students who cannot afford expensive brands. Although tutors and students from private high schools also mentioned some examples of good friendships and collaboration for schoolwork and sports between students from different social classes. A senior member of staff in a private institution explained:

A typical thing in Mexico is the darker your skin, the less you are worth. Well that just doesn’t happen here. Certainly not. So, we make it very overt to the parents that this is the institution that we are [PG4SS]

## *Challenges for social interaction*

Limited instances of social interaction between public and private high schools were found. Even amongst public high schools there are scarce opportunities for social interaction. This was the case with UNAM’s nine National Colleges (ENPs) and five Scientific and Humanistic Colleges (CCHs) according to the interviewed member of staff. He explained that within and across UNAM’s own high schools, there are clear socioeconomic and cultural divisions:

ENP 6 has the best reputation. Students need a110 points GPA to enter ENP 6 compared to 88 points in the less-ranked EPN, so students at EPN 6 are more intellectual… There is even classism within this CCH. Here we have many different groups, the socioeconomic deprived students meet in the arts garden, the affluent students meet in the esplanade; another group is the metalheads. These are urban tribes. For example, the anarchists will never hang out with a group from a private high school [OG1T]

This silo mentality seems to extend across UNAM’s private incorporated institutions as well. UNAM organises several academic, artistic, recreational and sports events for its private incorporated high schools. As of May 25, 2020, UNAM listed on its website that these events seek to generate a sense of belonging amongst private high schools within its Incorporated System and promote their participation in UNAM’s academic, cultural and sports events. It is important to note that social interaction does not form part of its objectives. We found that participation in these events differs amongst private institutions and it is not constant as incorporated private high schools need to opt-in to participate and sometimes they miss the registration deadline. Tutors also mentioned that differences in curricula and teaching methods across institutions (either vocational/technical or academic/general) are barriers for further social interaction between public and private high schools. Another barrier is the size of UNAM and IPN own networks of public high schools, which leaves little room for reaching out to institutions outside these networks:

Given the dimensions of IPN, we have enough with our own high schools. We are talking about 16 institutions, so we have less time to make contacts with institutions outside our own system [OT1SS]

Schools’ busy schedules is another factor, as a senior member in a private institution explained:

I think the problem is – and I think it’s the same with high schools that are public and us – that there is so much requirement from the curriculum that it’s really difficult to fit in anything extra [PG4SS]

However, a privately educated student whose friend took part in an academic event between public and private high schools organised by UNAM shared her friend’s opinion of such events:

There are all kind of people and when you get to see their work you think ‘ah, we are alike’ or ‘what an intelligent person’ or ‘wow, that would never occur to me’. So, you can see how intelligent people are before judging how they look like [PG1S1]

However, a head teacher from a private institution explained that their participation in these events often depends on UNAM’s senior managers as some are more inclusive than others when it comes to sharing information across the incorporated high schools. According to him, sometimes there has been discrimination against some of his alumni that later study a degree in UNAM. He explains that if the collaboration between public and private high schools were stronger, there would be less social discrimination at university because students would be more used to interacting with different people. However, according to one student, discrimination also exists against privately educated students:

I have noticed that students from public high schools feel prejudiced by privately educated students. Some people maybe do it but there are many who no longer want to make this difference. I feel like they sometimes downplay themselves more than what privately educated students actually do. I do not know if they criticise private schools because they feel that some students devalue them [PG5S1]

# **Discussion**

This paper explored views on social fragmentation amongst participants from public and private high-achieving high schools in Mexico City. It aimed to expose, through a limited sample size, some of the implications the public-private school divide represents for achieving social cohesion. The findings showed many barriers for social interaction but also some opportunities for an open discussion about the historic social fragmentation, which has been the result of different societal factors including unequal school opportunities facilitated by the public-private school divide. Amongst the barriers for social interaction is students’ lack of knowledge and awareness about the country’s rich cultural diversity. This has been a persistent big missed opportunity by recurrent governments, which historically have tried, in vain, to promote a none-existent national unity. It is not about social integration through schooling but about allowing social interaction within the existing educational quasi-market. It is about the opportunity to interact with people that otherwise students would not be able to meet within their compartmentalised lifestyles. The point is not to meet students from different backgrounds for its own sake but to allow collective learning amongst students from different sociocultural backgrounds. Many participants within this limited middle-class sample showed having not only social conscience but also some disposition to try out wider social interaction through schooling. Different studies have demonstrated that privately educated students hold ideas of meritocracy and tend to show little social conscience by accepting without complaint the divide between public and private schools (James et al., 2010; Kelly, Azaola and Schulz, 2019; Guerrero Farías, 2020). Our findings show that whilst some students might have a meritocratic view of education, they can also be aware of the current social inequalities prevailing in Mexico. During the interviews, different levels of social conscience were demonstrated. Many students mentioned the right of all children, regardless of their socioeconomic background, to receive education of good quality. Others were aware of the different life opportunities based on individuals’ socioeconomic background, and the scarce social interaction in their school contexts and elsewhere in society. Some students mentioned the mismatch between the country’s rich natural resources and the limited educational level of the majority of the population. Although many students advocated values of tolerance and equality towards students from different socioeconomic backgrounds, in practice, they tend to seek out and socialise with like-minded peers and uphold condescending values towards students from different social classes and ethnicities. The formally organised current opportunities of shared learning across institutions are scarce and inconsistent and do not aim to improve social interaction amongst students from different backgrounds. At the society level, we reject anything that remind us of our indigenous past by criticising the way ‘others’ speak, how they are dressed, what they eat, etc. These racist and classist stereotypes are very much present within the public-private school divide. As our indigenous past is devalued so is our public education system. Public education in Mexico educates to the majority of the population. As our findings show, not everything about the public system is bad and there are many valuable things that need to be recognised and shared more widely. There is no doubt that proposing wider social interaction across public and private schools will encounter fierce resistance from different angles, especially amongst the conservative and wealthy groups in society, but a shift in paradigm is needed. Previous research elsewhere has called for schools and employers to work more closely and encourage greater social cohesion (Kelly, Azaola and Schulz, 2019). Others have proposed curricular changes to foster empathy through citizenship studies and Personal, Social and Health Education programmes (James et al., 2010). However, my argument is that these initiatives might be used as mere tick-box exercises. What the present study proposes – apart from an initial stronger intercultural education – is the promotion of cultural, academic and sportive exchanges embedded within the curricula within the compulsory stages of schooling, especially at USE. The purpose of these planned exchanges would be to allow interaction and learning as equals amongst students from different sociocultural backgrounds. Until that happens, the question is whether it is feasible for grassroots initiatives to start promoting opportunities that foster wider social interaction. Grassroots initiatives elsewhere have shown mixed results. For example, middle-class parents who appear to be going against the grain by making counterintuitive school choices (James et al., 2010). Our own findings show that schools promoting values of respect, tolerance, non-discrimination and equality abstractly have not achieved stronger social interaction in practice. However, one example of an innovative education project aiming to bring together students from different cultural, social and religious backgrounds is the paired partnerships between Arab and Jewish schools in Israel. Supported by different stakeholders, including the government, and despite several challenges, the project has managed to implement shared learning successfully amongst students from very different backgrounds and with dissimilar educational attainment (Payes, 2018).

The initiative here proposed will not solve by itself the social inequality in education characterised by differential academic attainment. There is neither the assumption that if social interaction takes place, social fragmentation would lessen automatically. Realistically privileged families will always seek and attain the best opportunities for their children but schools can start deliberately promoting shared spaces for students from different sociocultural backgrounds to learn together within a safe environment. This study makes a call for further research in this area where more challenging explorations involving students from opposite sides of the socioeconomic spectrum can be undertaken.

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