Challenges of Schooling: Some Questions about the Role of School from the Parental Perspective

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Abstract

At a time when the legitimacy of School as an educational social universe is under discussion, the present paper seeks to reflect on parents'—especially those from socially deprived contexts—positions on the matter. Based on the results of an empirical study, we conclude that there is a multiplicity of meanings currently ascribed to School, which suggests the need for an active mobilization of educational actors in a participatory and contextualized construction of School that belongs to all and that is meant for all. Such a construction would better respond to the idiosyncratic reality of students and their families through the process of the permanent (re)legitimization of the School's role in contributing to greater social justice.

Keywords: School crisis; school parenting strategies; shared composite meanings of school; local educational community.

1. The School in Legitimacy Crisis

The right to equal educational opportunities, acknowledged in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Declaration of the Rights of the Child and, in Portugal, the Portuguese Constitution, as a formal principle of equality in academic access and success, means the following:

1. A free and universal education at a certain minimum level.
2. An identical distribution of knowledge to all.
3. Equality of educational resources: the same material benefits for all, and teachers with the same training in all schools.
4. An identical social or ethnic composition of the school environment: schools are not a place of segregation.
5. Equality in the school effects: students with the same social background and students with different social backgrounds should have the same equal opportunities to succeed in school (Cherkaoui, 1999, pp. 96-97).

However, the generalization of schooling to the entire population (Machado & Costa, 1998) has not generateda true democratization of academic success (Queiroz, 2001), and the persistence of high failure rates and high dropout rates for students from disadvantaged backgrounds remains a reality. The cultural heritage of the student plays an important role in this process; however, there are still cases in which students from working class backgrounds and environments demonstrate a prolonged and successful school path, which contradicts, to some extent, this logic of sociocultural influence (Lahire, 1995; Thin, 1998; Derouet, 1992; Queiroz, 2001).

The sociology of education has already established the existence of a close correlation between students' social backgrounds and their school path (with academic failure resulting in retention in the same grade or in school dropout, in its most extreme form). In this socially determined relationship (Queiroz, 2001; Sebastião, 1998), students from higher social strata attain, as a statistical regularity, better results (Cherkaoui, 1999).

According to Almeida *et al.* (1992), regarding the "low-skilled young people seeking their first job", this factor presents a potential negative future impact, thus illustrating, "the weak chances of those who are centrifuged by the school system" (pp. 79-80):

> The problem of poverty or vulnerability to poverty does not arise, here, in immediate terms. With the large majority of these young people still under the responsibility of their families, they may benefit, for some time, from the extension of that dependence.

There is, however, among these young people, a highly vulnerable subset. It is one in which low and very low levels of education and few professional qualifications match a modest family situation, which prevents significant and continued support. [...]

This deficit of education, in its various aspects, tends to be a mechanism that generates poverty and vulnerability to poverty, both for young people who seek an entry in the labour market and for those who will seek it in the short and medium term. The fragile skills they both possess will tend to reduce their competitive possibilities in the game of labour supply and demand (Almeida *et al.*, 1992, pp. 79-80).

Schooling plays "an important central role in socialization, particularly at the critical moment of identity construction that is adolescence. A student used, from the outset, to attain good grades enters a spiral of success, and vice versa" (Queiroz, 2001, p. 60), and this central role greatly contributes to a student's ability to define his or her social life (Cherkaoui, 1999; Machado & Costa, 1998; Capucha, 1998).

By questioning the role of the social institution as a fair and meritocratic social regulation device, the educational system is in a process of crisis of social legitimacy (Derouet, 1992).

These authors call into question one of the mainstays of school legitimacy: that school is an essentially meritocratic institution of democracy and social justice. In this context, the following questions arise: How can we apply the principle of equal opportunities, one of the founding cornerstones of School's legitimacy? What is the educational mandate of the School? How can we integrate children and young people within the educational process? How can School be fair and effective? What is the role of the State in these processes of development of students' potentialities?

2. *School Meanings for Socially Disadvantaged Backgrounds*

School education involves multiple sets of variables, including, most importantly, the social context, teachers, educational support staff, students, and parents and guardians, with each actor carrying different interests, rights, duties and sensitivities in regard to the educational process.

Hence the need to ascribe family a central role regarding the education of their children, because "family is not a simple passive terminal of social change, but rather one of the social actors that contribute to the definition of the forms and meanings of social change itself, albeit with different degrees of freedom and according to the circumstances" (Saraceno, 1992, p. 14).

There is a diversity of educational individual biographies that reflect "phenomena of dissonance and consonance between family backgrounds and school contexts" (Lahire, 1994, p. 76). Regarding the reconstitution of the educational path, there is a relationship between situations in experiences of school failure with retentions and dropouts, which may even culminate in the permanent abandonment of school, between the student's academic experience and the role ascribed by him/her to School.

Mobilizing some results obtained in studies carried out previously with individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds (Serpa, 2004a, 2004b, 2007), this article seeks to understand the perspective of these individuals towards School, and it is possible to identify different strategies: of *self-exclusion*, with the development of resistance in relation to the school path on the grounds of economic, subsistence, family support reasons, or even by a composite logic of these reasons; of *acceptance*, with the development of an attitude of delegation of legitimacy in School, in the person of the teacher, informed by a certain passivity; and of *cooperation* with the work of School, by investing in an attempt to contribute to a continuation of the successful school path, through a continuity between home education through the student's personal and family development.

It is undisputed that not all parents attach the same importance to the education of their children. If some live it intensely, others only take it when they must. Some are faced with a long series of failures or conflicts with school, others have children that are happy to be in school and that succeed without much effort. *The experience of schooling is not experienced by everyone in the same way. Yet, one way or another, ubiquitous or discreet, pleasant or threatening, school is part of the daily life of every family.* [...] We realized that families do not react by chance or only on the basis of their belonging to a social class and by what happens to their children; each one has its own way of building a representation of school and education, of facing the events, of seeking dialogue (Montandon & Perrenoud, 2001, pp. 1-9).

Certainly there are major difficulties in a more prolonged and successful school path in working class environments (Lahire, 1995; Thin, 1998). However, this phenomenon of school failure or dropout cannot be generalized to all these families, because it is *very* dependent on several factors, namely the number of children, their gender and their sibling position, and which may lead to different strategies for each daughter and/or son and to different educational paths *within the same family* (Serpa, 2004a, 2004b, 2007).

Families from disadvantaged backgrounds reveal, in some situations, modesty by avoiding public exhibitions of feelings of inferiority and shame, or avoiding delegating responsibility to teachers:

> School has, thus, become increasingly a basis for judgment on the parents themselves: on their economic, but also cultural resources, on their educational models, etc. [...] not only children but also parents have duties, whose performance is judged by agencies & criteria that are external to the family (Saraceno,1992,pp.151-152).

Likewise, Parent and Guardian Associations have *never* been mentioned by these parents, in their "relative resignation" (Migeot-Alvarado, 2000, p. 41), which indicates the difficulty that these entities face fully assuming their role as representatives of parents within the context of the School.

Thus, there are few complaints directed towards school activity that intend to potentially change the functioning of the School.

> If sometimes there is resentment towards injustice of their position, it rarely turns into energy for the involvement in a rupture project [...]. Resources are fully allocated to the live strategy of daily survival, being too sparse to sustain processes of upward mobility (Capucha, 1998, pp. 230-231).

3. Challenges of Schooling in a Parental Perspective: Some Questions

In face of new educational and social requirements and challenges, in a society with common composite matrices, and in a society where there is a plurality of legitimate orders of justification of the school role that coexist in a web of meanings that intertwine and contribute to the dynamic complexity of the educational and academic world, how can we promote education as collective responsibility of educational stakeholders: students, teachers, parents, community, State and government? How can we think sociologically about the phenomenon of the disrupted consensus on School? The results of the present study have shown that, in contexts of disadvantaged families, there may not be a clear effort on the parents' part of trying to establish a close educational relationship with the school.

This analysis allows us to conclude that it is not possible to speak of one reality, but rather of heterogeneous realities, in their plural complexity, that are based on the ascription of high importance to schooling in preparation for professional life, considering school selection as legitimate. This condition does not annul the existence of a manifest separation between School and family educational practices, ascribing these parents a decisive place based on domestic justification and it may evenlead to some families closing themselves off to School, in a cycle of (self) exclusion.

The answer to these problems as multidimensional phenomena does not lie only in School (Migeot-Alvarado, 2000). The answer requires a close inter-relationship between educational justice and social justice, expressed as joint efforts that may ascribe responsibility to the role of family in this process of creating a consistent network of articulations while recognizing the variety and heterogeneity of singular situations perceived as educational universes that must be considered on their own specificities and singularities, with their own weaknesses and vulnerabilities, and with contextualized solutions.

> Acceptance by the sociology of education, almost with no discussion, of the intrinsic goodness of compulsory education is an ideological assumption that has limited perception of school functions and of the blockages that affect it. A symptom of this is its lack of interest in an important debate today about the Welfare State and social policies, replaced by the import of concepts and formulations generally organized around the issues of *efficiency* and *quality in school*. Failure to assess the impact and the theoretical and empirical biases produced leads to further consideration of ways to adapt the institution to the various external demands resulting from social change (which also cannot be left out), and to the disregard of the autonomous construction of theoretical problems and objects that may contribute to an integrated knowledge of the various educational processes existing in society (Sebastião, 1998, p. 314).

Thus, it is the responsibility of the State to create consistent and continuous support at the educational, academic, family and social levels that considers these students' vulnerability and fosters integrated and inclusive policies in preventing exclusion so that such prejudices are not fed and translated into early and cumulative phenomena of failure and dropout.

Family and community cannot ignore this debate, and there is a need for an integrated approach to building synergies between the various actors in the educational process–students, parents, teachers and the local community itself play different, yet additional roles and enhancing a true tri-polar unity in an optimization of resources of family, school and community, facilitating greater educational and pedagogical continuity between these educational worlds.

In this framework, School can play an active role as a catalyst and mentor for a closer relationship between all educational stakeholders, towards a team effort that can contribute to a shared construction of the meaning ascribed to School.

> *Changing of institutions is done through a game of pressures in which the logic of the various actors and the occupation of professional spaces of each one play a decisive role.* Institutions do not change "by decree", [...] *government decisions determine a structuring framework, but the practices of the direct actors of school life are those that leverage, counteract, contradict or challenge and "push" the limits of governmental rules and measures* (Benavente, Costa, Machado &Neves, 1992, pp. 15-16).

In this process, the meaning of School–and of every school– is not built immediately, at once or once and for all. The meaning of School requires alternative solutions of dialogue aimed at preventing situations of school exclusion and improving the quality of education and teaching so that working class children are empowered to build their own successful personal path with autonomy.

The complex plurality found implies unveiling the meanings that the various actors ascribe to School, toassign meaning–through the mobilization and co-responsibility of shaping these logics of composite meanings in a collective construction of local community Schools that has a shared identity of the social meaning ascribed to education through contracts legitimizing School (Derouet, 1992)– to School, "especially in an era marked by the re-conceptualization of the citizen as *consumer* and of the educational project as a kind of *commodity*" (Lima & Sá, 2002, p. 78).

The existence of coordinated intervention strategies seems critical to achieve a permanent construction and reconstruction of non-stigmatizing educational and social support that is accepted by working class families, which, by enhancing close educational and social networks, fosters a real process of educational and social inclusion through the renewal of the social contract and the legitimizing discourse of the School.

This challenge of re-legitimizing the role of School in the context of extended liberal modernity (Wagner, 1996) implies reconsidering the roles played by the autonomy of School and educational community in the involvement of a mobilizing contract that may result in a compromise that will affect the functional significance assigned, in practice, to School. Such a contract would ascribe co-accountability in a school that integrates, through a connected succession of network projects in a reticular world (Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999), overcoming the false reassuring uniformity of a school closed in on itself.

The process of creating responsible dynamics of action that allow the creation of zones of convergence would imply a commitment on the part of the diverse educational actors (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991; Derouet, 1992; Resende, 2003), which may occur as integrated within the local educational community, thus enabling the creation of shared composite meanings and generating a strong collective School identity.

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