

Other articles

# Violence in some schools of Rio de Janeiro over the last 15 years

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**ABSTRACT:**

This article relies on material obtained in a research study on different features of school life in three municipal schools of Rio de Janeiro carried out in the 1990's and confronts its specific information on school violence (particularly in school A situated in the Northern zone) with data obtained from interviews conducted to mothers and focus groups, including teachers presently working in the Western zone (extension of the Northern zone). These interviews and debates confirmed the 1990's assumption of an evolution from the rural zone to the Southern zone and then to the Northern zone, which stemmed from belief that the paths taken by the Northern zone would end up radicalised in present Western zone.

At stake are forms of physical and verbal violence occurring at school, an increasingly labile institution where street patterns penetrate and get stronger inside. As for institutional power struggles, at the same time that mothers and pupils assumed more powerful positions in relation to the school hierarchy, so decreased discipline and respect for the teachers. This article also highlights some aspects of change in the forms of violence.

**KEYWORDS:**

School, Violence, Rio de Janeiro, Change.

## INTRODUCTION

This article emerged from perception that school violence has not only increased in Rio de Janeiro over the last 15 years, but it also changed its course in some senses.

Such perception is soundly grounded on research work. During 1996 and 1997 three municipal schools were surveyed in the rural zone (C), in the Northern zone (A), and in the Southern zone (B), respectively. Though they have not been randomly chosen (because the presence of researchers in schools is always difficult and depends not only on official authorization but also on previous relationships with teachers and leaders) they were considered highly representative of what had been happening in the city, being therefore capable of eliciting the information we needed, hardly obtainable from other sources — particularly considering the relations and trust built during two years of close contact by one of the researchers who had the opportunity to dedicate more time to the project, being present for longer periods, particularly in school A<sup>1</sup>. As a result, we managed to gather a considerable amount of knowledge on the most ‘intimate’ data of life lived in a Carioca school. Plenty of data: 105 pupils, 40 teachers, and 40 family members or pupil guardians were involved in the interviews. There is also abundant empirical material from hours and hours of observation on the school way of functioning and the way the *Conselhos de Classe*<sup>2</sup> (Paiva *et al.*, 1998) were run.

In the late 2000’s when discussing empirical data of PhD theses about Rio de Janeiro schools, a group of teachers and PhD students ended up landing on this theme, being thereafter organized into two focus groups according to the data they were willing to discuss. One of these focus groups included 7 of the highest qualified teachers working in Western zone schools or in the neighbouring municipality of the Baixa Fluminense though scattered all over the region. They showed

strong commitment, analytical capacity and a great revolt against policies imposed to the system which undervalued traditional learning contents. The other group was more homogeneous and included 8 teachers working in the same borough of the Western zone, with long experience and poignant awareness of what was going on in their working places<sup>3</sup>. Simultaneously, two additional interviews were also conducted to Western zone mothers working as maids in the Southern zone of Rio de Janeiro. Changes occurring in Brazil and Rio de Janeiro in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century equally implied deep changes in the life of their schools. The 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a boom in the expansion of the school system all over the world, in a process of school multiplication absorbing new and diversified school populations, teachers and non-teaching staff and similarly impacting on family lives. This revolution continues to follow its course even in cases of universalization of basic opportunities accompanied by a decrease in birth rates — because other educational levels continue their process of expansion, namely middle school, higher education, post-graduation, new levels of post-doctorate studies, young and adult education, updating opportunities for the oldest and re-qualifying large contingents of people. That is, school has progressively absorbed all age groups and social segments truly or potentially reaching out to the whole population. On doing so it became a new institution, simultaneously different from distant past school and from the school we knew in the 60’s or even in the 80’s. In slightly over half a century the student population in Brazil grew from 3 million to over 60 million.

Over the last decades, Rio de Janeiro with all its peculiarities has also gone through deep changes with impact on the life of its schools (Vidal, 2009), particularly after the capital has been moved to Brasilia, depriving the city from plenty of its professional, financial, social and political resources. Moreover, the school system is also

influenced by idiosyncrasies characteristic of what could be named as “peripheral radicalism”, meaning a trend of permeability to the penetration of new ideas and implementation of new proposals which central countries are more cautious to adopt. Besides, the dimensions of the municipal network are also to be considered (previously corresponding to the State of Guanabara) as well as its growth speed. On the other hand, particularly after the nineties, there has been a strict compliance to international guidelines (with special mention to the Inter-American Development Bank) more concerned with age-group flows as a way to increase the proportions of the system with no additional cost, having fostered symmetric policies with high impact on the quality of public education.

However, one should bear in mind that social violence is also felt in other countries and penetrates school, as is the case of poorer areas of France (van Zanten, 2001). We are obviously not speaking of all the European countries since each one chose its own strategy to tackle this problem. Besides, the proportion of people coming from other regions of the world and the reasons for immigration also differ from country to country. Much stricter and with occasional immigration resulting from the need to recruit foreign workforce rather than colonialist reasons, the Germans have been tackling this issue in a way to preserve their system. It is therefore a Western phenomenon linked to multiple factors of which poverty is not certainly the most convincing one, no matter how important it might be. In most countries, this is a result from quantitative democratisation (or “demographisation”) of school though in this case quantity does not necessarily mean quality in the democratisation of social interactions and demands stimulated by the fulfilment of former demands (Habermas, 1987). However, this is also a result from the impact of new technologies, mass media, and incentives to consumption, changes in juvenile behaviour and culture, and school transformations due both to a change in behaviour in general and to informalisation of social relations.

## PERMANENT RE-CREATION OF THE SCHOOL ORDER

There is consensus on the idea that violence has been growing in elementary and middle schools over the last decade. But what is violence and how is it expressed in a school context? The concept of violence is extremely diffuse and refers to a complex phenomenon involving ambiguity between permanent destruction and creation of order (Inbush, 2003, p. 13). Traditional education is a “natural” and unplanned process of socialisation (Dubar, 2000, 2005) whereby children are integrated in society, assimilate the group culture, live initiation rituals and

see their behaviour controlled. School systematizes this integration through coercive strategies and institutional discipline which according to modern tradition requires submission, obedience, recognition of authority and hierarchy, being conveyed not only through the contents transmitted but also through the processes used.

School is one of the institutions that most cherish the illusion that they can put an end to the “malaise of culture”, social indiscipline, doubt, and contestation. At a time when the volume of the school system and corresponding revolt allow the process of destruction and re-creation of order to accelerate and gain visibility in society, when doubt about the institutionalised order and respective legitimacy spreads out among different segments linked to school, it easily transposes school walls (Rutschky, 1988) opening up to a new school order.

Coercion and discipline-making traditionally take the form of actions and attitudes of teachers and non-teaching staff towards pupils in a public space, multiple forms of symbolic and non-symbolic violence, regarded as part of a self-regulation process which is indispensable to an institutional way of functioning. Pedagogic relationship is by nature asymmetric, uneven, and supported on pupils’ and families’ trust and on the legitimacy of what is transmitted through it. Present loss of trust and legitimacy resulted from a conjunction of factors that emerged in the 60’s. It is as if the 1968 movement carried out in central countries had not reached Latin America except in the form of democratic demands (such as more vacancies in the University, opposition to military or political dictatorship, as in the Mexican case) with some expressions which would later be mixed with other more general demands (as is the case of Freire) (Paiva, 1979, 1980). Although the generation that conducted the 1968 movement did not live the war, they were alert not only to the authoritarianism prevailing in Eastern Europe but also to open or subtle forms of authoritarianism in Western daily life.

However, school is not merely a mirror of society. As any other institution, school is also a stage of struggle among different segments, whose activity is ruled by the conquest of space, prerogatives, possibilities, and power, liable to breach through the instituted order or destruct bigger or smaller parts of it and promote its respective reconstruction. In this sense, there is always tension among school members aiming at setting the limits and possibilities of action, which in turn is strongly influenced by social reality. On such a stage the actors who used to be powerful in the school context seem to have been witnessing a progressive and increasingly accelerated reduction of power over the last decades, in favour of other actors, namely pupils and their families (or mothers, since a great number of families are matriarchal, composed of mothers and children, men coming and going while women stay with their children as trustees).

Relationship patterns between leaders and teachers, among teachers, between teachers and pupils, among pupils, between staff members and service suppliers have also been changing according to changes occurring in society. This process has in turn been strengthened by new conditions recently imposed to schools (reduction of human resources, diversity as for contract stability, deviation or accumulation of functions, etc.). This is common to all countries, though some have managed to soften the changes by means of topic measures and simultaneously raising awareness that citizenship and collective life presume a steadier acceptance of rules and laws than Brazilians ever did.

These changes also involve the institution's physical and material features, such as building and equipment. School buildings and their impeccable preservation in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century can by no means be compared with the huge schools of about 1000 pupils built in the 70's or with the "Brizolões"<sup>4</sup> of the 80's. In the 90's, teachers working in School A used to say they missed times before when "faces could be reflected on wax floor". Nevertheless, mothers felt ashamed of the school conditions of hygiene and one of them even told us that when she had guests willing to visit her children's school she used to go there before and clean it with her own cleaning material, so that they could get a more favourable impression of it (mother of a pupil attending School A). The conservation conditions of school equipment, the organization and its bureaucratic way of functioning were already quite bad at that time. Damaged toilets, graffiti, doors broken by pupils' kicks and careless washing since the water thrown to the floor also splashed the doors; chain locks all over the place. In such a context, recent liberation of certain budget items allowed many schools to refrain such degradation though the process continues its way forward in other schools where there is lack of conservation personnel and adolescent pupils waste part of their energy predated their school.

Over the last 10 years these issues have been intensified. A case broadcasted by the media on the complete depredation of a school and respective equipment and intimidation of teachers with no clear reasons (Azevedo Amaral School in São Paulo)<sup>5</sup> is far from being a "Paulist", rare, and "atypical"<sup>6</sup> situation: with more or less intensity this is frequent nowadays in different areas of Rio de Janeiro. In the school space where pupils spend most of their time apparently absurd, though intense, tensions arise, reflecting broader tensions they cannot explain properly, which cross their lives inside and outside school. Indiscipline, arguments and fights among pupils have always existed and are common among teenagers. What is not common is the fact that nail-scratches, hair-pulling, punches and kicks among some pupils turn into generalised and violent conflicts ending up in the total destruction of a school with teachers hidden and

locked up in a room, therefore obliged to call the police (*Folha de São Paulo*, 2008). Teachers' visible fear of pupils' violence weakens them and stimulates aggression: some pupils admitted to have pushed a teacher against a wall making him jump the wall and run away; others admitted to have beaten and thrown chairs to teachers and coordinators. Different and diffuse conflicts end up sliding into irrational forms of manifestation, this way of acting serving to emulate others, hence raising the radicalism of actions.

Whether it is true that social processes determine the level and form of change and institutional violence, the same is also true for the so-called individual violence perpetrated against peers in family contexts, in the street, in their wider social environment, and of course at school as well. The increase of violence seems to accompany the growth of institutions' internal dispute since the authority, which formerly insured internal cohesion and school regulations, became more vulnerable to contestation for multiple reasons. To sum up, loss of legitimacy of traditional patterns is intimately linked to current growing instability of institutions. In the specific case of the school institution, loss of respect for teachers and adults in general creates favorable conditions for violence manifestations inside it. The levels of subjective and objective restraint decreased, which makes physical and verbal aggression easier<sup>7</sup>. Yet, such statements should be relativized: neither is the loss of respect generalized nor is violence expressed in all its forms all the time.

A parenthesis here to clarify that most schools continue to function as ever, teachers are usually respected and committed to their tasks. However, certain attitudes and forms of addressing others traditionally regarded as impolite have been naturalized for at least two decades, the same having happened to kicks and shoves among pupils. Such manifestations have traditionally been refrained by specific school individualities that ceased to exist as such, which is the case of inspectors. The forms of addressing teachers, coordinators and even leaders are not the same any longer, either in form, words or gestures. Of course there are polite teachers, careful mothers, and obedient and committed pupils, but the pressure is strong and evolves visibly. Teachers who expected more respectful relations feel shocked and those who have just completed their studies are the most affected though many of them manage to impose more formal relationships depending on their capacity to adequately control the situations. There is a little of everything: teachers who start their lessons with prayers or music aiming at calming pupils down; others who bribe the pupils with chocolate when they perform well; and others who go for a walk hands in hands with a battalion of pupils. Problems get worse in pre-adolescence and adolescence when revolt most clearly settles down.

In the 80's, teacher unions claimed for the election of school leader. When this prerogative was achieved it generated new problems such as the constitution of internal aggressive groups with no defensible objectives other than pure power, obliging to fidelity, exclusion-based policies, dilution of authority, etc.. One decade later, both the performance of and the option for leadership functions became a far more complex issue. Only a few apply to such positions considering the problems they are expected to tackle, the difficulty in controlling the other school actors, and the increase of individual violence in the school context. Traditionally, conflicts used to involve pupils among themselves and with some teachers in the form of different kinds of threat; nowadays, respect for coordinators and the figure of the school leader has also decreased. There are teachers, for example, who "face" school leaders as for the distribution of pupils among classes; on the other hand, they also feel permanently threatened by denounces from different sources, either teachers, pupils, or coordinators. However, it all depends on the attitude of leaders and the relations they manage to establish inside school.

In many cases, leaders ceased to impose limits to the pupils. They often induce teachers not to be alarmed with obscenities "because this is the way they speak at home". In their opinion, teachers should speak the same language as pupils, saying for example, "I'm going to the loo for a wee-wee" instead of "I'm going to the toilet". Teachers should also accept the fact that pupils do not usually apologize (because they are not used to) or their coming to school dressed in colorful shorts or bermudas. However, this does not mean families agree with such guidelines though most leaders actually adopt them. Some parents do not only disagree but they also feel outraged with the idea that swear-words might come from home; in their opinion it is an acquisition from street and they criticize teachers for lack of correction/refraining, lack of firmness in what they ask from pupils, and lack of transmission of different habits. Decision on the guidelines to be adopted depends on multiple factors. Nevertheless, in almost all Western Zone the patterns observed correspond to the above-described picture and much to the teachers' indignation they are surprisingly prescribed by the Secretary of Education. These guidelines privilege the establishment of friendly relationships, activities aimed at raising self-esteem, simultaneously paying little attention to learning contents — an education for the poor.

Anyway, teachers feel vulnerable and unprotected since they may be admonished if they try to change pupils' behavior. Some respondents reported cases of teachers having been thrashed by pupils and one of them pushed with a foot on her chest (Western Zone interviews, 2008). On this matter a teacher commented the following, "there's nothing we can do!". In the 90's, being aware of

the value teachers' cars might have for their work in different schools, the maximum pupils would do was deflating the tires. Nowadays pupils set a teacher's car on fire and for fear the teacher says nothing to the police. Sometimes even for fear of being killed particularly when there is some connection with drug dealing or gangs. Questioning pupils can be enough to generate all forms of verbal disrespect like this:

You're not the boss here. Shut up! (Interview with teachers, 2008).

The replacement of older generations in school posts has also been a cause of big tensions among segments traditionally refrained by hierarchies. A good example is the case of cooks ("*merendeiras*") who used to remain in the same school all their lives long with no major conflicts. In current labour market conditions, the new contingents of cooks include University students used to organized contestation, hostile to teachers, possessing identical qualifications and feeling exploited because their contract terms establish the double of a 1<sup>st</sup> cycle teacher's workload for a lower position on the social status ladder<sup>8</sup>.

In the past, pupil hostility against school inspectors was not rare; holder of visible authority and catalyst of aggressive impulses, this figure of the school inspector simply ceased to exist. Thereafter, school corridors are no longer controlled and this is the place where pupils usually stay, along with the playground, particularly pupils from 06 or 07 classes (the worst in the *tracking*) with no discipline and feeling no obligation to go to their classrooms. In the 90's they used to stay outside, they cursed and mocked teachers calling them 'surucucu'<sup>9</sup> (School A teacher, 1996), they were cheeky and mocked one another all the time. In 1996, a School A teacher reported to have experienced a case of a child who "raised her voice, faced me, and yelled at me". Today, this is common in a teacher's daily life, making the 1996 statement "the school problem is also outside" truer than ever, as well as its reverse "the outside world is increasingly inside school". In the teachers' opinion, over the last ten years school major problem has been indiscipline. This is also the opinion of the president of Apeoesp (Teachers Association of the State of São Paulo) and the leaders of Carioca teachers: one of the causes of pupil indiscipline is teachers' loss of authority. Teachers were deprived of authority as school boards of autonomy', says Maria Izabel Azevedo de Noronha (*Folha de São Paulo*, 13 Nov 2008).

Some years ago it was frequent to see mothers unhappy because their children had taken bad marks. They used to control their study and punish them by forbidding them to watch TV. Today, the situation is quite different. On the one hand, this is due to parents' loss of authority and lack of time: nowadays they do not care



about learning difficulties. They want them to complete their studies and if problems arise that is all because their children “have been discriminated”. The truth is, some parents try to get closer to teachers, tell them about the problems they face, ask for advice. They still keep positive expectations towards school.

What then makes the difference between the 90’s and late 2000, beyond the naturalization of public patterns of language and behavior? The street has indeed largely penetrated school and imposed a significant share of the new order. However, pupils’ aggressiveness is nowadays stronger when it takes to racial and religious issues, for example. Awareness of racism is now widespread in the Brazilian society and facts which previously would not generate any conflicts are now matters of great tension. Of course this is a positive development. In a recent past teachers used extremely pejorative adjectives to refer to black or mestizo pupils though not always openly. In the 90’s, when we finally got access to the *Conselhos de Classe* where teachers usually talk freely among colleagues we obtained terrifying statements from teachers, rather elucidative of society’s high levels of prejudice.

There is a boy in my classroom who is always smiling and I ask him, “which ‘caboco<sup>10</sup>’ are you greeting?” And he keeps smiling, looking like an orangutan (COC School A, 1996).

In the most difficult schools, the way teachers speak of certain pupils shows prejudice, resentment, discrimination, and impotence before the reality they are supposed to tackle. This configures an ethos of potential confrontation easily transferable to words and actions. In this particular, repeaters become an easy target for discrimination. Moreover, this sort of manifestations have often been directed to entire classes (the worst in the *tracking*) and not only to individual pupils, using so unspeakable words and high level of prejudice that families would never dream of. Limit situations used to be more frequent in Northern Zone School A when automatic promotion was not yet in force:

Some classes are full of retarded, paralytic mummies. Awful class, nothing worst... They hate and mock each other, using all sorts of insults, animal being the most innocent. Those girls are nothing but freaks. They died and forgot to lie down (School A COC, 1996).

In both school A and B pupils used to be insulted off record as “ignorant, stupid, marginal, retarded, beasts” in the *Conselhos de Classe* (School A and B COCs, 1996):

These pupils are marginal, there’s nothing they care about. They’ll be shot dead with their mouths full of ants.

That is, even teachers thought these pupils were preparing themselves to get killed like bandits, which would not be very far from reality at least in some cases connected to drug dealing. However, teachers’ catharsis only happened among peers in the *Conselhos de Classe* where they usually say what they think. These manifestations used to be restrained by the representatives of the Regional Coordination of Education in the *Conselhos de Classe*. In the nineties they were supposed to participate in these councils but sometimes they did not and when they did they were treated with hostility by their colleagues who said, “Look, here comes the controller!”

Access to the *Conselhos de Classe* has always been very difficult to researchers since there was a generalized perception that this was a space for teacher catharsis, not only related to teacher malaise before school conditions but also to the way they thought and felt about their pupils. As soon as the true dynamic of the *Conselhos de Classe* became known from our study in the 90’s (known to the Secretary of Education of Rio de Janeiro) they started to be watched. Yet, if it is true that this research used examples of talks among teachers in close environments, it is also true that racist manifestations and other forms of discrimination among pupils have also become part of their lives, generating conflicts which inclusively involved their families. The fact is family and pupil reactions are more visible and incisive nowadays.

Yet, from a religious point of view Rio de Janeiro witnessed the same phenomenon of Pentecost penetration that has been affecting other regions of the country. Brazil has always been characterized by religious tolerance. However, aggressive proselyte Pentecostal groups treat their colleagues with hostility at school, particularly those professing African religions. Part of the violence has been transferred to situations where religious factors are present. Since a considerable number of teachers are also Pentecostals nowadays, they easily identify the pupils who profess African cults and in cases of disobedience, ill behavior or aggressiveness they frequently say they cannot stand children “*possessed by the devil*” in their classes or advise them to go to a “*discharge*” session in the Universal Church (Pentecostal). This makes mothers angry because they feel insulted at their religion. This also affects the other teachers who profess other religions and for whom it is clear Brazilian school is laic by law. This situation became a source of fights, insults and ill treatment among all involved.

Still, back to violence against school actors it could be said that in the 90’s it rarely involved support and cleaning staff. Nowadays, since the *Companhia de Limpeza Urbana* was charged with the cleaning, pupils’ social prejudice towards very poor social classes ended up taking these people as their targets. They are insulted as “*garis*”<sup>11</sup>, thus transformed into pejorative terminology. It is as if they were expressing a hierarchy of poverty.

Nowadays the shock is sharper, though more easily anticipated, for teachers educated to work in the ideal school. They are willing to try everything at hand but they come against wider policies which void what they consider should be their work — mainly transmission of curriculum and secondary socialization compatible with situations pupils are supposed to tackle later on.

On the other hand, mothers expect teachers to point out ways forward and they think there is omission in teachers' attitudes whereas many teachers think it is no use to appeal to families since nobody knows what to do. Work is becoming anguishing for lack of perspective from pupils, parents, and teachers. And this anguish is often expressed through aggressive attitudes and mothers competing with teachers.

Mothers' traditional respect for teachers decreased. Past revolt and hidden threat have not only been radicalized but they also assumed new attitudinal and verbal outlines. Teachers' wage improvement has also caused envy and despise, which evidences an impossible return to the respect and deference they had showed in the past. Data obtained from a *Conselho de Classe* in School A in 1996 illustrate the relationship pattern at that time:

A. asks to speak and reports a case with lots of drama: "some days ago, a mother came — quite negro, quite tough — bus conductress, willing to rant and rave at me. Then playing the Baiana, hands on hips and shaking all over, I accused her for her daughter's frequent absence to my lessons. At the end, she thanked me a lot and nearly kneeled at my feet. As an evening school director, I always say, Thank God mothers never come. Only bandits come to night classes and talk to us and we get along with them".

It is quite clear that the teacher faced the mother in her own cultural plan: hands on hips, "playing the Baiana". According to her, she would rather talk to the bandits directly than deal with their mothers. She meant the pupils of night middle-school classes whose code they already knew and whom they dared call bandits. Ten years ago absenteeism was still a strong argument. Not today. Nowadays, anyone feels free to do whatever s/he wishes. Mothers are always supportive of their children because the problem is nothing to do with learning: the only thing that matters is friendly treatment, being accepted the way they are, and staying in a safe place for most of their day. They go to school not only to complain but also to offend "substitute mothers". The language they use is public and only regulated by the tone of their remarks:

Look at them bitches! They're all late, the sluts, the vagabonds! Teachers in this school don't like to work, do they? (Teachers interviewed in 2008).

However, mothers' new aggressiveness is not merely targeted at teachers. One of the 2008 interviews reported the case of a mother who went to school, pushed the supervisor away and headed to the canteen with a wooden stick to punish one of her son's colleagues. Mothers are nowadays regarded as short-fused and making "complots" out of nothing. Before anything unpleasant they just slam their hand on the table and say, "What's on your mind? You're disgusting, you smart aleck, you slut. I'm watching you, madam!" Or they comment, "Look at this slut's rush!" Shack-dweller mothers use their size and voice to intimidate. Curiously enough, in many cases despite verbal aggression, offences, implicit intimidation, they continue to address a teacher as madam, which does not inhibit them from springing into action: a pupil's mother is held to have beaten a teacher in the Western Zone for a casual injury inflicted to her daughter. The result was also paradoxical. On the following day there was a civic parade where teachers participated dressed in black. Drug dealers became aware of the fact and decided to punish the mother who possessed a bar in the community: the only possibility to go on living there would be apologizing to the teacher, which has been done to the teacher's husband since the teacher herself was in no psychic condition to be present. In the following year the bar owner children were transferred to another school.

The 2008 reports highlighted the frequency of mothers' physical aggressions toward teachers. In the Western Zone, a teacher was slammed in the face and another followed outside school and when her car was identified a paving-stone thrown to it. This is not about responses to the same type of aggression but rather retaliation for real or supposed bad treatment or discrimination (racism, for example) or even reactions to situations of clear misunderstanding of bureaucratic rules and procedures linked to planned activities.

That is, school and community are true "tinderboxes". This is all about a macro-political stage of daily struggle among all segments, which is indissolubly reflected in the micro-political plan (Wenzel *et al.*, 1998). This has been an increasingly strong and accelerated process. Authority representatives (school leaders, teachers) started to be attacked not only through direct confrontation but also through literature and bureaucracy. Now that school is no longer a privilege of only a few, as has been up to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, but rather a mass institution everyone is obliged to experience and whose tentacles reach out to a growing parcel of individual lives, its aprioristic value has also changed making of it a new school.

For those who reflect on and control the school system, what is the legitimacy of a school that serves as a tool for the reproduction of an unfair social system? Why should one follow a certain curriculum considering it is an arbitrary construction rather than a logic device aim-

ing at conveying a range of techniques and contents in an organized way which might be useful to social life and hence liable to be learnt? If methods are dictatorial why should they be applied? All these issues belong to the power stage of struggle inside school and they are linked to outside forces and guidelines also present in the educational bureaucracy. They end up involving all school segments and pupils' families as they progressively form hardly rational areas of consensus which refer to fights outside school. In such a confrontation, norms are put into question and different clusters formed inside school.

Questions like these have been raised particularly after the 60's, a time when school as a mass institution was already settled in developed countries or in progress in all the other countries and when school bases for legitimacy started to be unveiled by social sciences and politically denounced. Although by nature scientific analyses go deep into the roots of social issues regardless of the contradictions of specific situations and although they use a particular jargon which is not usual in daily life, the political use of scientific analyses generate a colloquial

perception of such a terminology and a literal application in daily school life, therefore devoid of theoretical issues related to the social meaning of school, hence appearing as practical matters to be tackled as radically as its political understanding does.

We must recognize that the broader social system has also changed radically; however, school is a particularly sensitive institution: its clients are not helpless patients as in hospitals, adults specifically educated to preserve the dominant order as in courts, or employees under the threat of unemployment. They are vital teenagers, seeking personal affirmation and identity within their family or in society, facing the adolescent turmoil (Bernfeld, 1969) of physical transformations and sexuality. These youngsters form a huge mass inside schools, imposing their rules to the their shier and younger colleagues (true children in the case of schools sheltering two school levels) and living their own conflicts without understanding them fully and without being able to equate them as themes for reflection and most frequently transferring their problems to school life and respective actors.



## ENDNOTES

1. This research lasted for two years and involved three municipal schools of Rio de Janeiro: one of them in the rural zone, in a very isolated place at the time; a quite famous school in Copacabana which had started to receive pupils from the neighbouring ghetto; and a third one in the North. This latter school was the biggest one and the most intensively researched since it was the one showing the characteristics that most resembled Western zone schools. Contrarily to the others, it was a big school built in the 1970's to shelter over 1000 pupils, though at first it received Middle Class pupils from its surrounding community. During the Brizola government one of the schools in the neighbouring ghetto was closed and all its pupils transferred to this school, which became thereafter known as the "Danish invasion" (a joking designation). Therefore almost all references related to the 1970's deal with school A in the Northern zone. Some research outcomes can also be found in the journal *Contemporaneidade e Educação*, no. 3, IEC, Rio de Janeiro. The research basic material was loaned to Nancy Cardia and later to Jucirema Quintero with no right to pass it over so that they could extract the examples they needed for their theses.

2. TN: The *Conselho de Classe* is a collegiate body which includes all the class teachers and in some cases a pupils' representative and representatives of parents or guardians, charged with planning and monitoring the pupils' learning process, individually or as a group.

3. The names of the leaders and participants of the focus groups are not mentioned because they chose so

4. Name attributed to Public Education Integration Centres built during the Brizola government.

5. *Folha de São Paulo*, 13 Nov. 2008

6. Argument adduced by the Secretary of Education of São Paulo

7. A survey carried out by the Teachers Association of the State of São Paulo (APEOESP) reported that 87% of teachers interviewed in 1996 mentioned to have known of violence situations in their schools. In São Paulo schools, there was verbal violence in 96% of the cases, vandalism in 88.5%, physical aggression in 82%, larceny in 76%, aggravated assault in 18%, sexual abuse in 9%, and murder in 7% of the cases. A research undertaken by Udemo (Union of Education Experts of the Official Magistracy of the State of São Paulo) in April 2008 revealed that 68% of the 683 state schools included in the survey reported some sort of violence as having occurred in 2007. The Union had sent questionnaires to 5,000 schools all over the State. This survey also showed that 88% of the teachers and non-teaching staff members have been disrespected, 85% of the pupils involved themselves in strifes and 21% of the schools registered death threats to pupils, teachers, non-teaching staff and school leaders. Udemo had carried out a similar survey before, in 2000 and 2002, comprising 496 and 300 state

schools respectively. From 2002 to 2007, strifes involving pupils raised from 78% to 85%. The amount of schools covered with graffiti grew from 40% to 60% and car damages from 28% to 62% (*Folha de São Paulo*, 13 Nov. 2008). There is no such research in Rio de Janeiro but our interviews show that this reality might not be much different.

8. In certain areas of the Western Zone, the "merendeiras" arrive by moto and use the money they earn to pay for their private University fees. They constantly circulate from one environment to the other.

9. TN: Common Brazilian name for *Lachesis muta* snake

10. TN: A caboclo (or caboco, from tupy kaa'voc, 'who came from forest') is a person of mixed Brazilian Indian and white people ancestry. In Brazil, a caboclo is a specific type of mestizo (See more at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caboclo>).

11. TN: garbage collector.

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Translated by Filomena Matos