

The Parents' Turn and the Parents' Voice – Parental associations in the governance era

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ABSTRACT:

This article presents the general guidelines of our doctorate thesis whose object of analysis will be a Council Federation of Parents' Associations. The theoretical background is based on the integration and promotion of parental participation as an instrument of the education policies and its implications as a specific way of converting the relation between the public and private spheres and between the State and the public. The growing role of parents' associations, as well as the ambiguous and defensive effects that they cause in the educational system, derive from the development of internal processes of communication and construction of meaning, constituting themselves in an autonomous and self-referencing manner. However, the discourse, semantics and very agenda of the parental association movement shows a proactive and collaborative partnership with the needs emerging out of the political system, such as the needs of legitimisation and strategies of regulation of political decision makers. The point of view of the observer thus leads to the recuperation of the agonistic debate between the perspective of the "world of life" of Habermas and the "autopoiesis" perspective of the social systems of Luhmann.

KEYWORDS:

Public policies of education, Parental associations, Social systems, Autopoiesis.

THE PARENTS' TURN

Increasingly more emphasis is being given to involvement of parents and guardians in educational policies and the education system, as exemplified by the political discourses such as those recently published in the *National Confederation of Parents' Associations* magazine (see CONFAP, 2006)¹, or strengthened by public action tools which, in the name of the public, make room for parent participation and the parental association movement aimed at improving the quality and efficacy of the public education service.

In a context of reconfiguration of the State and the relations of the State with civil society, under the slogan of proximity politics and empowerment, political decision makers have been bringing devices, instruments and forms of instrumentation into the construction of the educational policies (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2004) that tend to encourage the idea of a necessary continuity between the State and civil society (van Zanten, 2004) and therefore grant parental associations growing opportunities for intervention and an active role.

Having established the status of parent-guardian in several decrees that regulate the education system, namely the law that consecrated the new management and administrative regime of schools (Decree-Law no. 115-A/98), Law no. 29/2006 (which updated the decree-law of the parents' associations – no. 372/90) and several normative dispatches that regulate the assessment and disciplinary status of

the pupil, the role of partner, user or client in the education system now incorporates the means of participation and organisation that consecrate the parent-citizen individual in public action, on the one hand, and the associative dynamics on the other. In practice, a vast range of possible initiatives and attitudes have been opened within the public education space and in access to the system that allow, completely legitimately, their implementation in various forms of “voice”, “exit” or “loyalty” (Hirschman, 1970), with this opening up of possibilities having a direct, immediate and unexpected impact in the education system.

The building of the “responsible parent” model (Stoer & Cortesão, 2005) therefore bases its reference model on the new forms of regulation that, under the aegis of governance (see Jessop, 1999; Mayntz, 1993; Muller, 2003; Salomon, 2002) makes citizens responsible, as strategic individuals, for compliance with a plan they did not draw up. The time of “governance” is therefore the time of a peculiar kind of government, in which the political decision makers invite the participation of neo-state actors, constituting communication and cooperation networks among the State and civil society, abandoning the style of large-scale reforms defined by the summit of the hierarchy, and introducing private sector entities or associations to formulate and implement the public policies.

In this time the mood seems to favour parental associations but the empowerment of the voice does not always keep up with the needs of the public.

THE PROBLEM I

Taking as the starting point the studies of Pedro Silva (2003) and Virgínio Sá (2004) we gleaned from the empirical observations and the theoretical and methodological framework of these two authors the signs that guided our point of view and difference in perspective.

Pedro Silva identified in the parental participation, and in the respective association set-ups, the indelible mark of the middle class's impressive capacity to act, underpinned by a hidden conservatism and cultural affinity as regards the values of school and educational professionals. The "parents' turn" in educational policies is therefore viewed as one of the traits of the neo-liberal agenda and the subtle instrumentation of the particular interests against the democratic purposes of the public school, favouring the reproduction of the dominant inequalities and cultural standards.

In the case study carried out by Virgínio Sá, his perspective is influenced by the neo-institutionalist movement in the organisational studies, leading him to put the emphasis on the normative and discursive duplicities, namely in the construction of participation, more illusionary than effective, in the education system, especially with regard to the parents' relation with the school organisations. The "responsible parents" would therefore be enticed to build collaborative, pacific, educational communities with an agreeable and attractive image (i.e. competitive), strategically excluding parents with civic and socio-cultural "shortcomings".

In both cases there was a feeling of disillusionment in relation to the effects of the "parents' turn" in the system, despite the enhancing of the democratic principle of opening up the school to parental participation. Long gone are the times of the apologetic reform of Epstein (1984, 1995), Don Davies (1989, 1994), Fullan (1992), and, among us, Ramiro Marques (1994). This disillusionment sees a "trap" (Silva, 2003) or "misunderstanding" (Dubet, 1997) where before it saw "co-education" "overlapping" or "partnership". Is this a paradigmatic turnaround or simply the turning of the page on the School-Family relation?

From a sociological perspective centred on the model of "class, race and gender", the focus inevita-

bly falls on the description of inequalities of power, resources, time and the citizen's access to the benefits, supposedly general and common, of citizenship. The neo-institutionalist model captures in a nutshell the continuity, conformity and hypocrisy of the organisations, the ingenious simulation of change so that everything remains the same.

If each observation encompasses a selection of observed events, the observer always transports a blind spot, i.e. a zone outside the scope of vision. Knowledge advances as the perception is that these successive vacuums are filled to meet with other questions and vacuums.

Parental participation in the form of an association can be analysed as a social system different from the education system and observed as outside the education system. First, as part of the so-called tertiary sector, the associative sector in general. Second, after having undertaken work for theoretical distinction and clarification, the action of the parents' associations can be viewed as a source of solidarity and as a complex mediation between the private space and the public space (Caillé, 2001; Lavelle, 2001). Approximation is a new object of study, which is selected based on an old object – parents' participation in school – thus producing a distancing effect in relation to the school world.

PROBLEM II

But as soon as we advance to this new object we understand that the reason behind the parental associations and their growing visibility derives from two complementary movements that take place in the so-called "knowledge society":

– The paths of governmentality of the Educator State and the epoch of the great reforms have led to a dead end, meaning that forms of self-organisation of the public are a necessary resource to supply creative energy for the "autopoiesis" (Luhmann, 1990) of the political system²;

– The legitimisation of political power is an increasingly complex, multi-referenced and multi-polar process, whereby it is not enough to invoke power and money as mediums of social coordination, requiring scientific and technical knowledge about the fields of action, the systems, the political

and social practices. In other words, knowledge is the capacity for public action (Stehr, 1994).

The associations, owing to the changes in the public policies, are themselves “embedded” in the networks of public action supporting means of regulation, insertion and competitive regulations (Laville, 2001, p. 120). The risk of being set up like subsystems of the political system or the education subsystem, in accordance with the internal dynamics of self-organisation and the structural fragilities, creates conditions for what Habermas (2004) called “colonisation of the world of life”, given that they are subject to the imperatives of mercantilisation and “juridification”³.

The question should be put on the highest level of social theory, namely recuperating the debate by Luhmann and Habermas on the structural coupling between the world of life and systems.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK I

The discursive and controversial dialogue of the debate between Luhmann and Habermas continues alive and up-to-date in the social science forums. Both authors assign crucial importance to communication as the structural factor of social order, both inherit concepts and problems from the sociological theory of Talcott Parsons as well as Husserl’s phenomenology. However, their perspectives contain undeniable differences, in many cases irreconcilable, but updated by academics of the most diverse orientations and areas of knowledge.

We find in Habermas’ theory of communicational action, and in the successive fine-tuning of the theory, the grounds for universal ethics, a humanist interpretation of modernity, a set of foundations that support the concept of deliberative democracy (Carreira da Silva, 2004). The regeneration of democracy, given the disappearance of the metanarratives (the great ideologies), and faced with the challenges of globalisation, is carried out in this perspective by the proliferation of the public spaces, in social discussion networks, in free argument and formation of opinion.

In Luhmann we find the theory of the self-referencing systems and the functional differentiation of the social systems as the framework for interpre-

tation of society and its evolution. This framework includes social systems such as “communication that communicates” (Balsemão Pires, 2004), as successive self-produced communication connections in a process of operational closure. Communication, and not the inter-subjectivity between actors or individual participants, is considered the only constituent of the social systems and it is reproduced and renewed through the constant updating of the key distinction between system and environment. The functional specialisation of the systems in modernity gave rise to the functional subsystems such as politics, the economy, education, science, law, which are endowed with functional autonomy and whose operational closure transforms them into “black boxes” for external observation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK II

If, on the one hand, parental associations constitute a social system with specificities that should be described and understood, even in the perspective of the “black box”, their nearness to the border with the education system is a controversial topic and open to many points of view for observation. This first apologetic wave, of whom Joyce Epstein is the most distinct representative, seems to have been inspired preferentially on the theory of open systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) observing the properties of the retroaction of the pedagogical relation and its openness to the world of the family. Parental associations were not viewed at the time as social objects of the associative world or as an “autopoietically” established social system.

The reformist wave that accompanied and unravelled the Welfare State crisis in the 1980s introduced models of regulation and instruments of public action that brought to the fore the strategic choice of the individual, atomising the process of contracting of the citizen, in spite of the discursive invocation of the community as was the case of the educational community model (Sarmiento & Formosinho, 1999). The raising again of the topic of parental participation through the criticism of the “trap” (Ball, 2004; Silva, 2003; van Zanten, 2002; Vincent, 2000; Whitty, 2002) therefore continued a critical tradition of cultural reproduction of the edu-

cation system (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970) pointing out the hegemony of the economic system and the inequalities rebuilt from the very operating of the system. A preferential look over the perverse effects of mercantile regulation of the education system marginalised the effects of instrumental innovation (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2004, p. 31) in the association movement itself.

The turnaround that we propose to learn about the associative movement as a social system hence requires an approach towards reconfiguration of the public space in education, inclusion of the parental association movement in the modes of regulation and the distinction of the environment system that operated the communicative construction of borders.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The “turn” and the “voice” of the parents are subject to the process of reconfiguration and participation that is not determined only by the top (political decision makers) or by the needs of the education and/or political system. The tone of the voice, the pressures of the exit or the elective confidence of the loyalty, are an expression of the will of citizens, of their identification process and a world of life.

It is not, however, in the individual or in the citizen-consumer, that we are searching for answers to the means of interpenetration⁴ of the various subsystems (family, education, politics, economy) but rather on the very associative movement and its “autopoiesis”.

As such the question is as follows: *what is the sense of responsibility conferred on and accepted by the parents, in the parental associations?*

Based on this question we will focus on the dimensions of the associative movement in three aspects: structuring, interdependence and identity, and we will formulate the three key questions of our research.

1. *What expectations drive forward the parental associations’ movement?*

In Luhmann’s view, the expectations are structural of the communication and its functional reproduction in the social systems. The structures that enable the maintenance of connectivity are relations of expectations with time, because “the connections

can only be achieved in time” (Vanderstraeten, 2001, p. 9). As such, not being able to anticipate contents of response, we seek in the formation of these expectations the experience and personal history of the actors, their investment in schooling, the influence exercised by the educational policies in the representation of the school institution and in the expression of interests, the effect of the media on the perceptions and representations of the family, the teaching and the school. On the other hand, what form do these expectations take? How is the “voice” or discourse translated, what impact and audience does it have, what are the preferred listeners and instruments? What are the dominant references in the construction of these expectations? What relation can be established between the main promoters of action and the different modes of expression of an identity – “voice”, “exit” and “loyalty”?

2. *How can one characterise the relations of interdependence between the associative movement and the political and education systems?*

It is necessary to make a distinction between the system and environment as regards associations, by looking at their very autonomy and identity. Although dependent on a set of regulations and possibilities written into the regulations of the education system, the heads of the associations stick to and describe their own participation in the different decision-making and consultation bodies of the school and political organisations. How are places of participation defined? How do they view the way their “voice” is listened to? Is their “loyalty” rewarded? Furthermore, a federation of interests constitutes a social system of political representation, which positions itself in relation to the democratic mechanisms and procedures registered in the functioning of a rule of law. What perception and representation of action by the State and public powers dominate the direction attributed to the association heads as regards their associations’ action? How do they view the transfiguration of their rights in law? How is the parental movement represented and perceived in the field of public action?

3. *How is the responsibility of an association head articulated with the identification process of the parent-citizen?*

We can affirm that the responsibility of the head of an association derives from the intersection of two

roles assumed in a vigorous form. First, that of a father, mother, or guardian, aimed at a positive relation and a positive effect of their intervention and participation, not only in the individual results of the child, but in the overall quality of the education. Second, the responsibility to lead a collective movement and represent a small universe of fathers and mothers, whose silence is a condition of the voice, and whose voice, functionally silenced by the representation, is transported to the political arena, to the discussion forums or to the communication networks. How do the actors view their own learning, experience and association implication? What narratives are constructed based on the associative experience? How is the role of the father/mother composed or combined with the role of the responsible citizen which is implicated and overlaps with the parents' association? What space for building citizenship is established between the public and private spheres?

FOCUS

Reduction of the observation of the associative movement and the three aforementioned aspects – structuring, interdependence and identity – lead

us to use prudence in selecting the focus of the object of study. The precarious nature and fragility of many Parents-Education Community Associations, i.e. basic associations linked to a school organisation do not guarantee us long-lasting and representative research into the associative movement. On the other hand, the Confederation (CONFAP) or the Regional Federations present themselves as distant objects in terms of the question of availability and accessibility (to the documentation and the actors) and in terms of time (given the professional limitations of the researcher).

We therefore have selected as the object of research a Council Federation. This choice will not deviate us from the practices of participation or the relations of the association heads with their school “partners” in the education system, but will aim to discover and recognise other non-school partners (council authorities, for example) in their dynamics and their environment. Moreover, the relations between the Council Federation and the different levels of organisation of the parent association movement (national, regional, district or local) should allow us to identify the networks of communication and the properties of coding and semantic references of this specific social system.

ENDNOTES

1. Where we can find messages from the President of the Republic, the Prime Minister, the Minister of Education and a text outlining the programme of the Secretary of State.

2. [*Autopoiesis*] Concept of Greek origin that Luhmann imported from Chilean biological evolutionists Varela and Maturana and which is applied by the German author to the emergence and reproduction of social systems.

3. [*Verrechtlichung*] Expression used by Habermas (2004, p. 357) to illustrate the colonisation of the world of life: the tendency to increase legislative production in modern society.

4. The concept of interpenetration is used by Luhmann to show how human beings, as part of the environment of social systems, introduce “noise” into the systems and involve themselves in a process of co-evolution. This same process applies to the relations between social subsystems (see Luhmann, 2005, ch. 6).

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