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### Thin versus thick democracy in education: porto alegre and the creation of alternatives to neo-liberalism

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# **Thin versus Thick Democracy in Education: Porto Alegre and the creation of alternatives to neo-liberalism**

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**ABSTRACT** In this article, the authors describe the ways in which a set of policies has had what seem to be extensive and long lasting effects precisely because these policies are coherently linked to larger dynamics of social transformation and to a coherent strategy that aims to change the mechanisms of the state and the rules of participation in the formation of state policies. They describe and analyze the policies of the 'Popular Administration' in Porto Alegre, Brasil but, more specifically, they focus on the 'Citizen School' and on proposals that are explicitly designed to radically change both the municipal schools and the relationship between communities, the state, and education. This set of policies and the accompanying processes of implementation are constitutive parts of a clear and explicit project aimed at constructing not only a better school for the excluded, but also a larger project of radical and thick democracy. The reforms being built in Porto Alegre are still in formation, but the authors argue that they have crucial implications for how we might think about the politics of education policy and its role in social transformation.

## **Introduction**

In this period of crisis in which we are living, we are told by neo-liberals that only by turning our schools, teachers, and children over to the competitive market will we find a solution. We are told by neo-conservatives that the only way out is to return to 'real knowledge'. Popular knowledge, knowledge that is connected to and organized around the lives of the most disadvantaged members of our communities, is not legitimate. But are the neo-liberal and neo-conservative positions the only alternatives? We do not think so.

While it is crucial to recognize and analyze the strength and the real consequences of neo-liberal and neo-conservative policies (something we have been doing for a long time – Apple, 1996, 2001, and Gandin, 1994, 1998, 1999), it is also essential to understand the renegotiations that are made in regional and municipal levels. As Ball emphasizes, ‘policy is ... a set of technologies and practices which are realized and struggled over in local settings’ (Ball, 1994, p. 10). Thus, rather than assuming that neo-liberal and neo-conservative policies dictate exactly what occurs in the local level, we have to study the rearticulations that occur on this level to be able to map out the creation of alternatives.

The Citizen School is an example of an alternative being created through such rearticulations. What is being built in Porto Alegre may be crucial not ‘only’ for Brasil, but for all of us in so many nations who are struggling in classrooms and schools to create an education that serves *all* of our children and communities.

### **Porto Alegre and the ‘Popular Administration’**

Porto Alegre is a city of 1.3 million people, situated in the southern region of Brasil. It is the capital of the state of Rio Grande do Sul, and the largest city of the region. Since 1989, it has been governed by a coalition of leftist parties, under the general leadership of the Workers’ Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores – PT, formed in 1979 by a coalition of unions, social movements and other leftist organizations). PT has been reelected three consecutive times, thus giving it and its policies even greater legitimacy.

The municipal administration, the ‘Popular Administration’, has brought significant material improvements to the most impoverished citizens of the city. In terms of education, the number of schools more than doubled since the Popular Administration took office.

One particular measure adopted by the Popular Administration – *Participatory Budgeting* (Orçamento Participativo or ‘OP’) – is credited with the re-allocation of resources to the impoverished neighborhoods. The OP is a mechanism that guarantees active popular participation and deliberation in the decision-making process for the allocation of resources for investment in the city. Santos offers a compact description of how the OP works:

*In a brief summary, the OP centers on the regional and thematic plenary assemblies, the Fora of Delegates, and the Council of the OP (COP). There are two rounds of plenary assemblies in each of the sixteen regions and on each of the five thematic areas. Between the two rounds there are preparatory meetings in the microregions and on the thematic areas. The assemblies and the meetings have a triple goal: to define and rank regional or thematic demands and priorities, to elect the delegates to the Fora of Delegates and the councillors of the COP, and to evaluate the executive’s performance. The delegates function as intermediaries between the COP and the citizens, individually, or as*

*participants in community or thematic organizations. They also supervise the implementation of the budget. The councillors define the general criteria that preside over the ranking of demands and the allocation of funds and vote on the Investment Plan proposal presented by the executive. (Santos, 1998, p. 469)*

The OP is at the core of the project of transforming the city of Porto Alegre and incorporating the historically excluded impoverished population into the processes of decision-making. Just as importantly, as a number of researchers have shown (Baiocchi, 1999; Santos, 1998; Abers, 1998; Avritzer, 1999), not only have the material conditions of the impoverished population changed, but also the OP has generated an educative process that has forged new organizations and associations in the neighborhoods. The citizenry of the city has been engaged in an extensive pedagogic project involving their own empowerment. There has been a process of political learning through the construction of organizations that enable full participation in the OP. In essence, the OP can be considered a 'school of democracy'. Yet, there may be an even more significant educational aspect in the OP. The government agencies themselves are engaged in being 're-educated'. Popular participation 'teaches' the state to better serve the population.

Working in tandem with the OP, there is another more specifically educational project for the city, the *Citizen School*, implemented by the Municipal Secretariat of Education (Secretaria Municipal de Educação or 'SMED'). The Citizen School is pushing in the same direction and aims to initiate a 'thick' version of education for citizenship very early in the formal education process through the creation of democratic institutional mechanisms.

Before we describe some of the mechanisms created by the Citizen School project, we want to situate this initiative within the global context of predominantly neo-liberal reforms. If we are to understand the case of the Citizen School, we have to investigate the particular rearticulations being forged at this locale.

The concept of articulation is central here, because it helps us to understand the 'work' that has to be done to disconnect and reconnect ideas and practices. To disarticulate a concept historically associated with counter-hegemonic movements and rearticulate it to a hegemonic discourse actually requires a good deal of creative ideological work. To disarticulate this concept from the hegemonic discourse and then rearticulate it back to progressive and counter-hegemonic initiatives is even more difficult. This is a dynamic process, because, as Hall states, 'an articulation is ... the form of the connection that *can* make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute, and essential for all time' (Hall, 1996, p. 141).

The concept of articulation provides us with a tool to understand that the apparent homogeneity and solidness of a given discourse actually is an historical construction, one that has to be constantly renovated, if it is to be

maintained. Connections that are established between groups and specific ideologies are not given. They are better understood as 'non-necessary', as more or less contingent relations made possible in a specific context and in a specific historical moment.

This conceptual framework can help us to better understand the case of Porto Alegre. As we already noted, there is a process of conservative modernization going on in education around the world. One of the key claims such a movement has put forth is that education is not only a crucial cause of the economic and cultural crises many nations are experiencing, but it is also a major part of the solution. If 'we' prepare students for a world that is increasingly governed by the relations of an ever-more competitive new capitalism, 'we' will be better prepared to excel in the globalised market. Education, hence, is stressed as a privileged site in this hegemonic discourse.

However, when this discourse reaches Brasil and, more specifically the city of Porto Alegre, some interesting rearticulations are forged. In the dominant discourse, an emphasis on education is related to a consistent attempt to colonize the space of 'legitimate' discussions of educational policy and practice and, hence, to produce an educational environment more in tune with the economic needs of the market. But when this global process enters Brasil, contradictions are created and a hybrid product is formed. This is the case because, even though the hegemonic discourse tries to colonize the educational sphere, once it meets the realities of the Brazilian context, it creates unintended spaces for alternative experiences.

The idea that education will solve the problems of the country allows a discursive space that can be reoccupied by arguments for more investment in education. The Popular Administration uses this space to prioritize education for everyone, in a country where education for the poor has been decidedly neglected. Once the space is rhetorically reoccupied by a discourse of more investment in education, the Citizen School can deploy its alternative agenda. It can work on a very real transformation of priorities and can invest in a project building a 'thick democracy' that focuses on an emancipatory education for the excluded. In the process, the Popular Administration can also recuperate and reinvent concepts such as 'autonomy', 'decentralization', and 'collaboration'. Even though these concepts were taken up and rearticulated by neo-liberals, they have had a completely different meaning in the popular movements in Brasil. The Popular Administration has itself begun to successfully disarticulate these key concepts from neo-liberal discourse and to rearticulate them to the Citizen School project.

However, we need to be conscious of historical movement. The fact that these disarticulations and rearticulations are happening does not mean that the Popular Administration has permanently won the battle. Hegemonic groups themselves are constantly attempting win back the meaning of key concepts and to reoccupy the terrain of educational policies and their meaning. Thus, education remains a site of struggle. But, it is still crucial to realize that a dominant hegemonic bloc cannot control all spaces

simultaneously. As the Citizen School project shows, even its own discourse can be rearticulated to favor counter-hegemonic purposes.

This is visible in the use of the concept of citizenship, a 'sliding signifier' that can be used by both neo-liberal and more progressive agendas. This concept, central to the project in Porto Alegre, has a very specific meaning in contemporary Brasil. It is not a random category; it symbolizes the struggles against the ongoing attempts to introduce market logic inside public sites such as education. Thus, an emphasis on the formation of citizens within public schools has to be read within this context of discursive struggle. The category of 'citizenship' serves as a discursive weapon against the rival notions of 'client' or 'customer' that have played such an important part in the language of neo-liberalism.

These creative transformations have affected common sense. The Popular Administration has been reelected three times. Certain issues are already established in the conversation about elections in the city of Porto Alegre. No political party can win the election in Porto Alegre if it do not guarantee that certain elements created by the Popular Administration – such as direct participation of the communities in the decisions of the municipal schools – will be maintained. There is a new set of expectations about the relationship between communities and the municipal government and this has been incorporated as a new common sense of the city.

Now that we have laid out the terrain of discursive struggle, we examine some of the institutional mechanisms created to implement the Citizen School project in the reality of the school system and in the daily lives of the schools themselves.

### **Creating the 'Citizen School'**

Public education [1] in Brasil is governed in a complex manner. It is simultaneously a responsibility of federal, state, and municipal governments. The Federal government is responsible basically for post-secondary education (universities). Recently a national education law was passed giving the larger responsibility for elementary [2] education to the municipalities and for secondary education to the states. Nonetheless, because there were a considerable number of state schools that were attended by elementary school students, the law actually established a co-responsibility of state and municipal governments. In the city of Porto Alegre, therefore, elementary education is under the responsibility of both state and municipal administrations. In reality, however, the municipal administration of Porto Alegre is responsible for early childhood and elementary education [3] and, because of that, the Citizen School project only involves these levels of education.

Historically, as a rule, schools in Brasil have had little autonomy. In the majority of states and cities there are no elections for the city or state council of education (traditionally a bureaucratic structure, with members appointed

by the executive), let alone for principals in schools. The curriculum is usually defined by the secretariats of education of the cities and states. The resources are administered in the centralized state agencies; schools usually have very little or no financial autonomy.

Although recently Brasil has achieved a very high level of initial access to schools (close to 95%), the indices of failures and dropouts are frightening. This reality is where the Citizen School, and the entire educational project of the Popular Administration, begins. It represents a sharp contrast with the policies that produced such indices. The field of education has become central to the Popular Administration's project of constructing new relations between state, schools, and communities. The Citizen School is organically linked to and considered a major part of the larger process of transforming the whole city.

The municipal schools of Porto Alegre are all situated in the most impoverished neighborhoods of the city – in shantytowns (favelas). This is because the expansion of the system occurred recently (since the Popular Administration took office in 1989) and the schools were built in the zones where there was a clear deficit of educational offering. In fact, some of the schools were constructed as a concrete result of the OP. A number of the regions of the city prioritized education and, specifically, a school in their assemblies.

Dealing with the excluded of Brazilian society, the Citizen School has a clear and explicit project of transformation. It 'institutes the possibility for citizens to recognize themselves as bearers of dignity, to rebel against the 'commodification' of life ... In the Citizen School, the conformist and alienated pedagogy that sustains the idea that history is a movement rigorously pre-organized as a realization of capitalist needs is denied' (Silva, 1999a, p. 10 [our translation]).

In order to construct the principles that would guide the actions of the Citizen School, a democratic, deliberative and participatory forum was created – the Constituent Congress of Education. Through a long process of mobilization of the school communities (using the invaluable lessons learned in the mobilization for the OP), a Congress was constructed whose objective was to constitute the organizing principles that would guide the policy for schools in the city.

From the Constituent Congress, the main normative goal for education was defined as a radical democratization in the municipal schools along three dimensions: democratization of management, democratization of access to schooling, and democratization of access to knowledge. In order to implement these principles of democratization in the educational system of Porto Alegre, the SMED and the Popular Administration created several mechanisms designed to achieve this goal. The following section examines some of these mechanisms.

*The New School Configuration*

The first transformation involved one of the most pressing issues facing schooling throughout Brasil – the terrible exclusion of students. It was aimed at abolishing the existing grade structure. Instead, it established 3 ‘cycles’. In the municipal elementary schools of Porto Alegre, there are three cycles, each one 3 years long, for a total of 9 years of education. The establishment of such cycles is a conscious attempt to eliminate the mechanisms in schools that perpetuate exclusion, failure, and dropouts. To counteract this, students progress from one year to another within one cycle, thereby eliminating the notion of ‘failure’. Yet the SMED understood that the elimination of mechanisms of exclusion was not enough. It established ‘progression groups’ where students who come from other school systems (from another city, for example) and have experienced multiple failures are given more close attention so that they are ultimately integrated in the cycle.

*Transforming ‘Official’ Knowledge*

Curriculum transformation is also a crucial part of Porto Alegre’s project to build ‘thick democracy’. It is important to say that this dimension is not limited to access to traditional knowledge. What is being constructed is a new epistemological understanding about what counts as knowledge as well. It is not based on a mere incorporation of new knowledge within the margins of an intact ‘core of humankind’s wisdom’, but a radical transformation. In the Citizen School, the notion of ‘core’ and ‘periphery’ in knowledge is made problematic. The starting point for the construction of curricular knowledge is the culture(s) of the communities themselves, not only in terms of content but in perspective as well. The whole educational process is aimed at inverting previous priorities and instead serving the historically oppressed and excluded groups.

The starting point for this new process of knowledge construction is the idea of ‘thematic complexes’. Through action research (one that the teachers do in the communities where they work, involving students, parents, and the whole community), the main themes, ones that come from the interests or concerns of the community, are listed. Then, the most significant interests and concerns are constructed into a thematic complex that will guide the action of the classroom, in an interdisciplinary manner, during a period of time. In this way, the traditional rigid disciplinary structure is broken and general interdisciplinary areas are created.

Let us give a concrete example of how this works. One of the schools organized its thematic complex in the ‘socio-historic’ area in order to examine questions directly linked to a particular set of interests and problems of the community. At the center of the complex was the issue of the community’s standard of living. Three sub-themes were listed: rural exodus, social organization, and property. In the rural exodus sub-themes, the issues



reflected the origin of the community – living now in a favela, but originally from rural parts of Brasil. This is a common story in the favelas where people who had nothing in the rural areas come to the cities only to find more exclusion. In these sub-themes, the issues discussed were migration movements, overpopulation of the cities, an ‘unqualified’ work force, and marginalisation.

In the sub-theme of social organization, the issues were ordered in terms of temporal, political, spatial and socio-cultural relations. The issues, again, represent important questions in the organization of the community: the excessive and uncritical pragmatism of some in the local groups and associations, the connections between neighborhood associations and the OP, and cultural issues such as religiosity, body expression, African origins, dance groups, and ‘samba schools’. In the third sub-theme – property – the issues were literally linked to the realities of the living conditions of families in the favela: living in illegal lots with no title, having to cope with the lack of an infrastructure, and the constant need to fight for their rights as citizens.

This example shows the real transformation that is occurring in the curriculum of the schools in Porto Alegre. The students are not studying history or social and cultural studies through books that never address the real problems and interests they have. Through the thematic complexes, the students learn history by beginning with the historical experience of their families. They study important social and cultural content by focusing on and valorizing their own cultural manifestations. Yet, it is important to note that these students will ultimately still learn the history of Brasil and the world, ‘high’ culture, etc., but this will be seen through different lenses. Their culture will not be forgotten in order for them to learn ‘high status’ culture. Rather, by understanding their situation and their culture and valuing it, students will be able to simultaneously learn *and* have the opportunity to transform their situation of exclusion. By studying the problems (rural exodus, living in illegal lots, etc.) and not stopping there, but also studying the strengths of self-organization (in the OP, in neighborhood associations, in cultural activities and groups), the Citizen School helps to construct alternatives for these communities who live in what are clearly terrible conditions.

We also can see in this example that the historic silence about race in Brasil is being challenged. Bringing the African origins of the music (samba), of the religion (candomble), and openly discussing racist practices in Brasil, in the process of constructing critical knowledge, teachers and students are learning that the silences about oppression only help the reproduction of exclusion and racism. Thus, the Citizen School has embarked on a dual path. It has recognized the necessity of creating empowered channels where people can speak openly, but it also knows that at the same time one must unveil the meanings behind these voices, question their hidden presuppositions, and construct new knowledge. Beginning from the insights of the community, it is necessary not to stop there, but rather to construct knowledge that fights

discrimination, racism, and exclusion. This experience overcomes the limited forms of multiculturalism that usually are put in place in the curriculum offered to the excluded (McLaren, 1995; Giroux, 1995). Not only does this new model of where knowledge comes from incorporate elements of 'ethnic information', but it also aims at constructing a new form of 'official knowledge' (Apple, 2000; Apple & Beane, 1999) by shifting the center of discussion to the lived experiences of the dispossessed.

### *School Councils*

School Councils are the most central part of the democratization of the decision-making process in education in Porto Alegre and are the product of concerted political efforts both by the popular administration and by a number of social movements involved with education in the city. These councils are composed of teachers, school staff, parents, students, and one member of the administration.

Each School Council has 50% of the seats for teachers and staff and 50% for parents and students. One seat is guaranteed to the administration of the school, usually the principal (elected her/himself by all members of the school), something to which we shall return shortly.

The task of the School Councils is to deliberate about the overall projects and aims of the school, the basic principles of administration, and the allocation of economic resources. Their responsibilities also extend to monitoring the implementation of these decisions. The Principal and her/his team are responsible for the implementation of the policies defined by the School Council.

In terms of resources, it is important to say that, before the Popular Administration took office, there was a practice (common throughout in Brasil) of centralized budgeting. Every expense (even small daily ones) had to be sent to the central administration before it was approved. Only then would the money be sent to the school, or a central agency would purchase the necessary product or service. With such a structure, School Councils had their hands tied and possessed no autonomy at all. The SMED changed this structure and established a new policy of making the resources allocated to each school available every three months. This measure institutes financial autonomy for the schools, and allows schools to manage their expenditures according to the goals and priorities established by the School Council. At the same time, such autonomy gives parents, students, teachers, and staff present in the Council a notion of social responsibility in administering public money. It also teaches them to determine their spending priorities with solidarity in mind (SMED, 1999b).

It is important to realize that participation in the School Council demands a certain level of technical knowledge. Because of this, in order to enhance the participation of parents the SMED has been promoting Municipal Meetings of the School Councils (six, up until the year 2000).

This is a space where parents, students, teachers and staff acquire the tools and construct the necessary knowledge to administer the schools. It also generates an arena where the individual Councils meet and share their knowledge and their doubts, allowing for a larger perspective beyond a corporatist or a 'localist' view that tends to dominate in situations such as these. Furthermore, the SMED has a permanent program of 'formation' (continuing education of all the participants) inside the schools. This provides an additional space for the education of the councilors.

Although the School Council is a remarkably democratic institution, there is another structure that guarantees representativeness as well. In the schools of Porto Alegre, the whole school community elects the principal by direct vote. Thus, the one responsible for the implementation of the decisions of the School Council is her/himself elected, based on the program that she or he articulates. This enhances administrative legitimacy in the community. The principal, hence, is not someone who represents the interests of the central administration inside the School Councils, but is someone with a majority of supporters inside that particular educational community. But the responsibility of the community does not stop with the election; through the School Council, the school community also monitors the activities of the principal and holds her/him accountable.

The process of direct election of principals by the whole educational community produces considerable levels of mobilization. In the 1998 elections for principals, data from the Popular Administration indicate that almost 30,000 people voted. Once again, this provides an important part of the democratic learning of the communities, especially because the very process provokes a good deal of debate about the varying proposals for managing the school. The direct election of the one responsible to implement the directives created by the School Council, and a School Council that is elected directly by the school community, together represent a pedagogic mechanism that aims at both generating and teaching the principles of democratic management at the local level of the school.

### **Judging Success**

Up to this point, our focus has been on the processes and mechanisms that have been put in place in Porto Alegre. Yet, a final question remains. Are the mechanisms created capable of realizing the goals? Here we can only offer some tentative conclusions, since the reforms in Porto Alegre are ongoing and still 'in formation'.

Obviously, we have already offered some elements of an evaluation throughout this article. The Citizen School, through the collective creation of goals and mechanisms that generate active involvement of the communities, so far seems to be a genuinely transformative experience. The Citizen School has broken with the separation between the ones who 'know' and will 'educate' (the administration) and the ones who 'don't know' and need to be

'educated'. A new form of thinking not only about education, but also about the whole society, seems to be in gestation.

The epistemological rupture that plays such a major role in the experiment also allows for optimism. The challenge to what counts as knowledge, to what counts as core and periphery, represents the essence of the educational proposal. Local knowledge is valorized and considered essential to the educational and democratic quality of the project.

This vision of 'thick' democracy is crucial. As we argued earlier, the project of the Citizen School has also radically challenged the roles of the traditional school. In these transformed schools, all the segments of the educational community collectively construct the principles that guide their daily action. But the project not only constructs this as a goal; it also consciously takes up the task of *creating* concrete participatory mechanisms to implement these goals. In the process, a new conception of respect for the diversity of cultures is generated. Challenging the elitist belief that impoverished people from poor neighborhoods or slums cannot participate because they are 'ignorant', the Citizen School inverts this logic, placing the ones who live the problems at the center as the people in a privileged position to construct alternatives.

A major difference here is the fact that the objectives are not simply the formulations of a team of experts in the SMED, but are a democratic and collective construction, with the participation of all the segments involved in education (including especially those people historically excluded from nearly all of the processes involved in education). As we showed, taken in their entirety, the participatory mechanisms created as part of the whole design for reform by the Popular Administration are powerful ways of implementing the goal of democratization of decision-making and of implementing and monitoring processes in the schools and in the educational life of the city.

The SMED clearly wants the decentralized local School Councils to achieve the larger goals for the education of the city; but these larger goals were themselves forged through a democratic process. In this sense, what the Popular Administration is avoiding is a common practice in Brasil and in many other countries where power is devolved to local units but these are held accountable by criteria not based on democratic decisions.

The SMED understood that participation is a process that had to be *constructed*. Therefore, it consciously launched a program of providing advice and education so that people could participate knowledgeably in the OP, in the School Councils, and elsewhere. Thus, the transfer of technical knowledge has been an important part of the process. The mechanisms of the Citizen School re-constitute the participants as subjects, as historical actors. Participants are not only implementing rules, but are part of an historical experiment of reconstructing the structure of the municipal state.

This can be seen in the fact that the school community gets to decide the allocation of economic resources. The schools are granted autonomy in the management of their share. This has had a significant impact on the

reality of the schools themselves. Of just as much import, unlike many other parts of Brasil where decentralization has actually meant a decline in real resources, the decentralization that has occurred in Porto Alegre has not been accompanied by an allocation of fewer resources. This process has produced a real empowerment of the School Councils and not – as in the majority of the cases in the rest of the country – a mere formal transfer of responsibility from the centralized agencies to the local units, a transfer whose ultimate effect has all too often simply meant that local units have been forced to cut needed programs. Such decentralization is usually merely part of the legitimation strategies of the regional or national state as the state exports the fiscal crisis downward (Apple, 1995, 2000).

We still need to ask, however, whether such participatory processes and the changed curricula have had real and substantial effects on issues such as exclusion in schools. While data are limited, they do seem to show significant improvement in terms of quality. Since it took office in 1989, the Popular Administration has increased the number of schools by more than 220%. The number of students enrolled has risen from 24,332 in 1989 to more than 50,000 in 1999. But without any doubt, the success of the Citizen School can be measured by the sharp decrease in the number of student dropouts. In 1989, when it took office, the percentage of dropouts (and remember that we are talking about elementary and middle schools) was a frightening figure of nearly 10%. The consequences of this for already disadvantaged and excluded children were truly horrible. Through the Citizen School's emphasis on parental and student involvement, curriculum transformation, teacher education, and other similar mechanisms, the SMED reduced this dropout rate to 0.97% in 1998. This is clearly one of the most important educational achievements of the project. If the children stay in school, then clearly the new curricular proposals can actually affect them (SMED, 1999a).

Another telling fact is the virtual nonexistence of vandalism against the majority of the municipal schools. School vandalism used to be a serious problem in public schools (and still is in the state schools). The fact that the community actively participates in the governance of the schools, and actively uses them as a space for the community (for sports, cultural activities, etc), creates a sense of responsibility and enhances the notion that public goods are the property of all. That many of the new schools are fruits of the OP makes the school 'theirs' as well.

### **Potential Problems**

While we have been very positive in our evaluation of the project here, we do not want to be romantic. Although the mechanisms and the curriculum constructed by the Citizen School have a good deal of potential to construct an education that helps to include the historically excluded, there are a number of potential problems that need to be carefully examined.

One potential issue is the possibility of a recreation of hierarchies within the cycles. The cycles represent a very thoughtful innovation. They allow students to stay in school, thereby combating the serious problem of dropouts. The overall structure also allows a more integrated construction of knowledge, which valorizes the knowledge that the students bring from their community. Yet we need to step back and ask whether parts of this structure could ultimately lead to the production of new hierarchies of students within the cycle. Even though they are seen as temporary, the progression groups have the risk of creating a 'second class' group of students.

Another potential problem of the Citizen School project is related to the issue of class. The Workers Party has historically had its roots in a Marxist understanding of the primacy of class. Parts of the Marxist tradition have been accused (correctly, we think, in many cases) of choosing class as not just the central, but often the only, category of analysis, thus subordinating other forms of oppression to class (See Apple & Weis, 1983; Apple, 1988, 1999; Connell, 1995; Dyer, 1997; Fine et al, 1997; Omi & Winant, 1994). Thus, in the material produced by the Popular Administration there are several explicit references to class oppression-and rightly so; but there are fewer references to racial or gender oppression. This could potentially lead to a position that ignores the specificities of oppressions other than those that are class-based.

It is to the SMED's credit that these potential problems are not unrecognized. As we demonstrated, there is some evidence that the practical experiments of the Citizen School are incorporating race issues into their thematic complexes. In addition, the various mechanisms of continuous education of teachers in the Citizen Schools do provide sites where explicit discussions of race, gender, and sexuality are brought up, thereby creating theoretical spaces for the construction of new practices that challenge the silences about these themes. These movements represent positive signs, in the sense that the members of the school communities are using the open channels to problematise the issues of daily life, issues that certainly include moments of prejudice and racism. It is also true that the Popular Administration has several advisory boards (with both budget and structure, and the power to act) that have the explicit task of bringing up the themes of gender, race, sexuality, and religiosity.

Hence, although these potential problems should not be ruled out, there are reasons to believe that there are open spaces for popular organizations, such as the growing activist movement among Afro-Brasilians, women's social movements, and gay and lesbian organizations, to operate and demand from the state agencies the inclusion of issues that we believe should be part of the agenda of every citizen who fights oppression.

One final potential issue needs to be mentioned. The very fact that the entire project is based on an active engagement of the citizenry could have serious consequences in terms of sustainability. Because the city administration is using citizen participation in all sites where a process of

policy decision-making is necessary, the requirement for active engagement of the members of the communities is multiplying. There are dozens of sites where an active and involved citizen or activist is asked to contribute with her/his perspective. This could generate an 'overload' for those who are already integrated into other sites of deliberation. How many hours can a working-class person, with two or three jobs necessary to feed her/his family, allocate to deliberative instances? Can the levels of active engagement with the participatory institutions be maintained over the time? Our own involvement in political/educational work of this type, and the intense time commitments this requires, leads us to worry about whether such involvement can be maintained.

Yet, once again, our worries are lessened by the fact that the SMED seems to be trying to deal with these potential problems proactively. We are witnessing an *increase*, not a decrease, in participation in the democratic mechanisms that have been put in place by the Popular Administration.

All this should not make us overly sanguine. It is important to point out that because of the electoral success of the Popular Administration – currently in its fourth term – the previously hegemonic conservative forces have responded with renewed vigor. There has been a major reorganization of the Center-Right forces in the city to challenge the policies of the Workers Party. So far, these attempts have been unsuccessful. Nevertheless, one should not minimize the strength of the possible Center-Right coalitions that are being formed to defeat the Popular Administration and its comprehensive program of reforms. As we have seen repeatedly in other contexts, Rightist movements have been able to successfully mobilize around issues of racial backlash, economic worries, and anti-government sentiment (Apple, 1996; 2001). It remains to be seen whether such mobilizations will have any marked effect in Porto Alegre.

As a final problem, one could ask how a municipal administration has been able to implement an educational policy that clearly stands in opposition to Brazilian national policy, a policy that has been highly influenced by neo-liberal impulses. Here it is important to again point to the rearticulations that have been created by the Popular Administration. Following the recipe prescribed by those who defend neo-liberal practices, the structure of education in Brasil has been highly decentralized to municipalities. As with other areas, here too the Popular Administration explored and expanded these impulses to the maximum in order to create an educational system that challenges traditional models of education that consistently failed. In this case, there is little that the federal government can do to interfere with the project of education that is going on in Porto Alegre. However, having said this, we also recognise that currently there is an increasingly strong tendency to introduce national testing in Brasil. The combination of neo-liberal and neo-conservative policies that such testing entails at a national level could potentially influence the degree of autonomy

of the municipalities and states in implementing dominant educational policies. This is something we shall need to closely follow in the near future.

### Conclusion

In this article, we have sought to situate the processes of educational policy and reform into their larger socio-political context. We have described the ways in which a set of policies has had what seem to be extensive and long lasting effects *because* they are coherently linked to larger dynamics of social transformation and to a coherent set of policies and practices that aim to change the mechanisms of the state and the rules of participation in the formation of state policies. All of this has crucial implications for how we might think about the politics of education policy and its dialectical role in social transformation (see also Wong & Apple, in press).

The Citizen School has been important not only as a way of giving an impoverished population a quality education that will enable them to have better chances in the paid labor market and at the same time operate as empowered citizens, but also because it has generated structured forms of 'educating' the communities both for organizing around and discussing their problems *and* for acting on their own behalf through the channels of participation and deliberation. In the process, it has 'educated' the state agencies as well. The OP, the Municipal Congress of Education, the New Educational Configuration of the Schools, and the School Councils have – together – helped to create the beginnings of a new reality for the excluded. They have forged new leadership, brought about the active engagement of the communities with their own situations, and led to much more active participation in the construction of solutions to these problems.

In spite of the potential problems we discussed above, we are optimistic about the lasting impact of its democratizing initiatives and its construction of a more diverse and inclusive education. Together with the OP (with its own cumulative effects), they represent new alternatives in the creation of an active citizenry – one that learns from its own experiences and culture – not just for now, but also for future generations. For these very reasons, we believe that the experiences of Porto Alegre have considerable importance not only for Brasil, but for all of us who are deeply concerned about the effects of the neo-liberal and neo-conservative restructuring of education and of the public sphere in general. There is much to learn from the successful struggles there.

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**Notes**

- [1] Apart from the public system of education there are innumerable private schools in all levels (pre-school, elementary, middle, high and college). They attend almost 10% of the Brazilian students in elementary schools.
- [2] Elementary education is understood here as grades 1 to 8 and high school education as grades 9 to 11. Brasil has 11 grades of school education (plus early childhood education for children from 0 to 6 years old).
- [3] There are 2 municipal high schools, but there is no intention of building more of them. They are a legacy of previous administrations.

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