

The meanings of school and Physical Education for students and teachers of a municipal public school system

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Abstract: Considering that recent historical and social changes have had effects on school life, this research was aimed to understand the meanings of school and Physical Education based on the significances ascribed by teachers and students of a Municipal Public School System. Using participant observation, field diary, interviews and document analysis as our theoretical and methodological options, we built five interpretive categories that are the focus of this article: School and their relations with knowledge; School and Physical Education; School and the current challenges experienced by subjects in their daily lives; School, changes and projects; Thinking the meaning of school is thinking the meaning of life.

Keywords: School. Physical Education. Teachers. Students.

1 INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Considering that recent historical and social changes have had their effects on school life and the school community, we conducted this research to understand the meanings constructed about school and Physical Education based on narratives by two groups: teachers, represented by seven PE teachers; and students, represented by 12 young people enrolled in Primary Education in two schools of the

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Porto Alegre Municipal School System (PAMSS) and attending Physical Education classes. Our choice of schools and subjects for this research considered the criterion of typological representation when representing old and new schools at PAMSS; schools with small and large numbers of students; teachers who are starting or already advanced in their careers; teachers working 20-40 hours a week; students who have been enrolled in the schools since cycle C and students who have done all their Primary Education in schools surveyed (cycles A, B and C);¹ students who have experienced projects and programs that are part of the school routine, among others.

Understanding school as an educational institution under ongoing reconstruction by the subjects who interact in it every day, we present the view of Pérez Gómez (1998), who sees it as a “crossroads of cultures”, because several differently organized groups are part of that context: teachers, students, employees, management staff, students’ families, the community where the school is located, Department of Education, among others. The author draws attention to the concepts of “experiential culture” – the process of building meanings and significances performed by students in their several life contexts, that is, beyond school, in their family, community and affective relationships, among others; and “social culture”, consisting of influential values in a specific historical and social context, for example, the school’s own culture.

Arroyo (2000) understands pedagogical practice as “interaction between generations”. Therefore, it is possible to think that school consists of subjects of different generational times, world views, desires, interests and values who will spent together part of their time in class situations, day after day, for years, in the specific social context of school.

About what is done and intended in school, Moreira and Silva (1995) underscore the importance of the school curriculum

¹Since 2000, all PAMSS schools have become “cycled”. This organization of the education system divides Primary School in three cycles, each one lasting three years. Cycle A includes 6-9-year-old students; cycle B includes 9-12-year-olds; C cycle includes 12-15-year-olds.

as a means of selecting, organizing and producing intercultural relations (teachers, students, reference groups and academics). The authors address this issue as the center of educational action and highlight the critical perspective of the curriculum, understanding it far beyond technical, procedural and methodological aspects, which means: (1) emphasizing its socio-political intention by giving priority to power and control relations present in the process of organizing school knowledge; and (2) questioning the “how” connected to the “why” with respect to knowledge that are part of the curriculum. Thus, the curriculum is understood as a concrete way of constituting individual and social identities crossed by power relations as well as a historical, social and contingent artifact – therefore open to change.

Analyzing these reflections, we realized that in order to build knowledge about the meanings of school today, we need to understand the cultures that make up the school context. Therefore, we sought to understand the problem of knowledge based on listening – by listening to people involved in the school’s educational process, even though we recognize that perspectives are formed in different contexts: the perspective of teachers’ culture and that of students’ culture. Thus, we considered the remark of Sancho Gil (1999, p. 35) when underscoring “[...] characteristics and peculiarities of school as an institution with a history, an organization and a confluence of biographies”. From this, the knowledge problem that guides this research was summarized as the following question: **Which directions will be given to school and to Physical Education nowadays, by teachers in this area of knowledge and by Elementary school Students of the Porto Alegre Municipal School System?**

2 METHODOLOGICAL REMARKS

For this research, we corroborate Sancho Gil’s (1999, p. 40) understanding that “[...] knowledge has to emerge from reflection about experience, from the action of teachers and students rather

than from decontextualized inquiry”. Thus, we reflected on research today as a process to produce knowledge – and learning – among subjects (SILVA, 2009).

The qualitative analysis of phenomena as a way to produce knowledge seeks to describe, understand and interpret the significances, meanings, representations, discourses that subjects construct and to which they are subjected in the context in which they happen. According to Eisner (1998), authors and researchers seeking to understand the educational phenomena in qualitative terms try to analyze and explain the dynamics of social relations. Kincheloe and McLaren (2006) see Qualitative Research from the point of view of Critical Hermeneutics and highlight the importance of interpretation in that way of doing research.

Understanding research as a collective action built with the place where it is being conducted and with subjects and other groups of the context studied, we found the way to carry out this research in ethnographic and narrative studies. Therefore, we tried to go beyond the descriptive and interpretative aspects enabled by ethnography (GOETZ; LECOMPTE, 1984, TRIVIÑOS, 2001, TRIVIÑOS; MOLINA NETO, 1999, WOODS, 1986), highlighting the perspective of narrative research (CLANDININ; CONNELLY, 2011, PÉREZ-SAMANIEGO *et al.*, 2011), thus considering researchers’ interpretative aspects while confronting them with interpretations of research subjects themselves – in this case, teachers and students.

Thus, what we tried to do in this research was – besides analyzing, interpreting and understanding subjects’ perspective from our perspective – to understand and present the idea that subjects can and should be analyzed, interpreted and understood from their own perspective. Based on this, we conducted research that circulated between ethnography and narrative, using elements of both forms of research to better understand the knowledge problem. Therefore, we used descriptions and interpretations (ethnography) and sought to understand the construction of

subjects' experiences, from their narrated and lived perspectives (from narrative research).

We believe that one of the key points of narrative research is to debate field texts, transforming them in research texts. In our view, Clandinin and Connelly approximate narrative research and ethnography when they express the following:

In order to join the stories built along the research, to become part of the landscape, the researcher needs to be there long enough and to be a sensitive reader of and questioner of situations in an effort to grasp the huge number of events and stories, the many twisting and turning narrative threads that pulse through every moment and show up in what appears to the new and inexperienced eyes of the researcher as paths to understand mysteries. [...] A narrative researcher's intimacy may be the ability to come to a consensus with participants. (CLANDININ; CONNELLY, 2011, p. 115)

By complementing the analysis of ethnographic research with narrative research as methodologies it is possible to think that the former aims to understand meanings constructed based on a group – ethnography – and the latter aims to understand meanings based on subjects – narrative research. Thus, we consider the relational aspect between the two perspectives, according to which the meaning of the group consists of meanings of the subjects.

Thus, in view of the above, it is possible to think that this research **focused on subjects' narratives in ethnography**. According to Bueno (2002), the “paradigm shift” that brings/places the subject into the center of interest of the research process “[...] can be observed in other human sciences [...] that are breaking away from the established models of research and daring to build their own ways of addressing their issues” (p. 14). Narratives reorganize and reconstruct subjects' significant experiences, proposing, through accounts, their coordination with broader dimensions to understand social phenomena. Thus, they consider the wealth of experiences that emerge when subjects perform a reflection on

their knowledge (BETTI; MIZUKAMI, 1997).

By focusing narrative research on the field of Physical Education, Pérez-Samaniego et al. (2011) describe what they mean by narrative and its features, and highlight some reasons to choose studying narratives in this knowledge area. Similarly, as presented so far, the authors point out that, in recent times, narrative research has gained ground in the field of Social Sciences.

Thus, researchers are narrators and tellers of stories about others' stories, and the main argument for the development and use of narrative research emerge from the idea that human beings, individually and socially, live narrated lives. Associated with this view is the one that human beings are narrative beings who tell stories, which largely stem from the social and cultural world in which they live. Therefore, if subjects are constructed (as human beings) through stories they live and narrate, narrative would certainly need to be a core part of Social Sciences and the areas that have human beings and their relationships as the focus of their studies. From that perspective, Pérez-Samaniego et al. (2011) understand that narrative is an ontological condition of life.

In this research, procedures for obtaining information were developed and systematized according to Woods (1986), Triviños (2001), Triviños and Molina Neto (1999), Flick (2004), Goodson (2004), Denzin and Lincoln (2006) and Bolívar, Domingo and Fernández (2001). Thus, using participant observation, field diary records, interviews and document analysis as theoretical and methodological options, we built and further examined knowledge about the meanings of school to those who constitute it daily (seven teachers and 12 students from two schools in the School System surveyed). To finish this section, we underscore that required

ethical guidelines were considered to conduct this research. Subjects were firstly invited to participate in the study and then informed about the content and uses of the information. After agreeing to participate, they signed the “informed consent form”.²

3 CATEGORIES FOR ANALYSIS

Next, we present the five interpretive categories built during the research from the narratives of teachers and students of the School System studied: (1) School and its relations with knowledge; (2) School and Physical Education; (3) School and the current challenges experienced by employees in their daily lives, (4) School, changes and projects; and (5) Thinking the meaning of school is thinking the meaning of life. They are discussed below.

Importantly, when asked about the meaning(s) of school today, both teachers and students stressed that school is important because it deals with knowledge, wisdom, teaching, learning and they point the context of class and disciplines as the center of these constructions.

We were able to learn important considerations for understanding the research’s knowledge problem: (1) the school as one of the places – and not necessarily the main one – for access to and construction of knowledge; (2) the needs and challenges to relate historically built knowledge with the reality experienced by students; and (3) the dilemma of knowledge fragmentation and therefore the search for activities and projects that influence interdisciplinary practices and attitudes.

On the first point, we stress the view that school is one of the places where students can learn and build knowledge, since out of school they have contact with several other forms of learning

²The Term and the initial Research Project were approved by the University’s Research Ethics Committee, under case number 19702.

– media, cell phones, internet, social media networks – and other spaces that may be more interesting and with which they identify. In addition, the meaning of school related to the world of labor emerged in students' narratives – the idea that knowledge and learning can help people to get jobs and in their future choices are built at school. Therefore, construction of knowledge – and learning – in class contexts and a supposed choice of work provided by curriculum components are meanings that students ascribe to school, here understood as a world of possibilities.

Regarding the second point, the diversity of themes that cross school life, like sex education, environmental education, values, rights and duties, etc., seems to be a mark that challenges teachers in their pedagogical practice and requires that they articulate concrete situations experienced by subjects in their contexts, in order to change the social reality experienced by students.

Reflecting on the third aspect, teachers' narratives presented alternatives from collectively shared projects (e. g., forms of networking and interdisciplinary work), as actions that seek to allow the world of life to flood the world of school.

3.1 SCHOOL AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION

We consider Physical Education as a multidisciplinary area that pedagogically debates body practices of the body culture of movement: sports, gymnastics, games, fights, dances, and other practices that constitute that culture (BRACHT, 1996; 2010). Understanding what teachers do at schools has become necessary to know their history, teaching experiences, training processes, how they build relationships in the school context, among other aspects that make up these practices.

While it was clear that sport is a central knowledge among the themes of the body culture of movement worked on in the Physical Education classes observed in this study, teachers of the schools studied are committed to changing the school culture regarding

that practice. Therefore, we should point out that some Physical Education teachers seek to organize their practice by relating the specific knowledge of that area with contents developed by teachers who are references³ for A cycle classes, i. e., they seek to work together with the working conditions they have. Similarly, it is noted that other teachers are trying to think and discuss Physical Education pedagogical practice at school, while proposing some changes in the organizational and pedagogical structure of the area: in the pedagogical approach to sports at school, focusing on the challenge of working with boys and girls together in class and in doing the activities; the emphasis on elements of collectivity, collaboration and understanding that each student has their time to learn about body action; discussions at the beginning and end of classes about what they accomplished and learned, among others.

Similarly, other topics of the body culture of movement and other pedagogical practices in Physical Education classes are being included.

The meanings ascribed to Physical Education by students and learning built in those classes can be summarized as follows: body and sports activities; respect, support and overcoming; a moment of freedom for the body; health and possibility to care for the body; leisure and the construction of that space within the school and community.

In short, and not focusing on the analysis on distinct perspectives presented by teachers and students, but presenting the diversity of meaning making, it was possible to understand that Physical Education is undergoing a process of change, since it has been thought of as a curriculum component and in its connection with the school's educational pedagogical project. Therefore, it is possible to think that the meanings ascribed to Physical Education are linked to the meanings ascribed to school, which could be observed in the narratives of some teachers when, by reflecting on the meaning of school, they added: "and Physical Education goes the same way".

³Teacher in charge of the class.

3.2 SCHOOL AND THE CURRENT CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED BY SUBJECTS IN THEIR EVERYDAY LIVES

Among the knowledge constructed in this category, we underscore that one of the current challenges faced by teachers in their everyday life at school lies in the experiences narrated about the culture shock they faced and some still face when joining the PAMSS. That has less to do with the teacher being a beginner in the profession and more with being in a new work context. Culture shock could be understood through teachers' challenging and uncomfortable experiences when they had to adjust to the System: students, different cultures, forms of welcoming by the System and schools, among others. At the same time, the pedagogical shock experienced by other teachers contributed for them to see some contradictions when joining the PAMSS, especially between what they knew about the project of educational cycles and what they actually found in schools and discussions on interdisciplinary and fragmented knowledge.

The main challenges narrated by teachers, which they have to face at school, are related to situations of social vulnerability experienced by students and their families regarding contact with, use of and rehabilitation from illegal drugs; students experiencing domestic violence; families that are "dysfunctional" or involved with alcoholism; violent attitudes among students in class, etc.

As for Physical Education practices, teachers narrated that negotiations, agreements and disagreements are daily processes they conduct in class so they can carry out their practices. Sometimes, they perceive themselves as more critical and reflective and at other times they are more civilizing, due, among other reasons, to conflicts expressed by students at school that interfere with the pedagogical practice. Some teachers considered these situations faced in everyday life as one of the pedagogical challenges faced today by schools and Physical Education teachers.

Students said that the challenges they face at school are connected to the construction of social relations with their colleagues that take place in that context and forms of intolerance experienced in relation to other people. Thus, fights and discussions (among students) and disrespect (among students and between students and teachers), both in class and in other areas of the school context (schoolyard, recess, etc.), were narrated as challenging and unpleasant situations experienced at school. These events point to coping with the other and the different, and challenge students to deal with diversity in the school context.

3.3 SCHOOL, CHANGES AND PROJECTS

The analyzes and discussions proposed in this category consider reflections and practices of a project carried out in one of the schools studied, which aimed to think about current meanings of school. This project, called Mix, rethinks what is done at school especially in two respects: 1) the breakdown of activities by knowledge area; 2) the possibility of making pedagogical relations horizontal and reinterpreting places and knowledge. This reinterpretation of knowledge is manifested both in the way students live with each other under project Mix – building knowledge in exchanges – and in the relationship they build with that knowledge in this context.

Every quarter, individually or in pairs, teachers organize, plan, carry out and evaluate pedagogical practices based on a specific topic, considering students' interests. Such Mixes are presented to all classes at the beginning of each quarter and students enroll in the one they wish to do.⁴ That constitutes the first re-interpretation of the project's place: each Mix group is formed by students

⁴Mixes offered in 2011 and 2012 were as follows: Student Council; Mosaic/Art/Landscape; Myths and Beliefs; School Flavors, Philo-writing of Kafka, Music and Fun; Memories, Telling the History of School' June Festival, Naturalizing the Disabilities; Everyone can learn, Cinemix, The Quintessential Mário Quintana; How does Brazil work?; From Compass to space; LIAUMIX; English; Sexuality; Preparation for Work; Poetic Musical Encounters in Rio Grande; Customization; Life Games; Journal School; Internetese; By searching I can learn it too.

from cycles B and C, and the class of each cycle gives way to the corresponding Mix.⁵

Thus, it is possible to think that construction of knowledge from a specific discipline gives rise to construction of knowledge based on a topic. Similarly, we believe that this Mix group enables students to transit in distinct learning spaces in which they coexist and interact with colleagues not only from different year-cycles, but even with colleagues from other cycles, talking, arguing, learning about the issues of each Mix and in relation with others. Reinterpretation of knowledge is manifested both in the way students live together in the Mix, building knowledge in their exchange with teachers, and in the relationship they build with knowledge addressed in that context.

The rupture of logics, structures and routines cited above can be approximated with Hernández's understanding (2007) when he highlights some naturalized narratives about school set in the sixteenth century and still present today, for example: that the only way to group students in school is by age; only one teacher should work with each class; textbooks are the main source of learning; classroom space is to be closed to help controlling the group; tests account for what students have learned; separating by disciplines is the best way to plan what should be taught; fragmented hours are the only way to organize school time; etc.

We can think that, regarding the analysis presented here, in this category the Mix activity gives meaning to school today, proposing some changes in forms, spaces, organizations, pedagogical practices, knowledge-building proposals, among others.

The project's actions also provide teachers with ways to do collective work based on interlocution with other teachers and with students. It is possible to think that the project enables us to break with some institutionalization of times, spaces and ways of knowing and building knowledge at school.

⁵Names of research subjects were replaced to preserve their identities.

3.4 THINKING THE MEANING OF SCHOOL IS THINKING THE MEANING OF LIFE

In the dialogue with subjects, school was referred to as a space to build social bonds. It somehow suggests that subjects who live in it daily build significances that go beyond what is experienced in the time/space of the school institution. Therefore, thinking about the meaning of school invites us to think about the meanings of life in the crossing of daily experiences that take place in that context.

Therefore, these reflections on school life, teachers' lives and students' lives sought to understand the way subjects construct relationships with others and the world in their daily lives: in the groups they work and study; in the beliefs and understandings that guide teachers' pedagogical practice, among others. When reflecting on the meaning of school, students do that based on what they experience in everyday school context and their interaction with the world. For them, school is understood as a place where they can realize their life projects, what they wish to study and learn, their professional choice, their construction of social relations – that is, school as a possibility.

For example, when teacher Paulo says that “in that space where we're living, where we give our blood, our affection, our hope to people involved there”, and when student Gerusa points out that “[school] is important for me to be able to break new ground, to go further, like, realize my dream, they're helping me be”, the meanings of school intersect in that desire that school can offer something that goes beyond school experience itself; meanings that are also supported by the desire to realize their life projects.

Unsurprisingly, school is not detached from reality and is permeable to the social contexts in which it operates. In the narratives, that context seems to provoke school and deserves more attention in relations with the knowledge built into it, since, as teacher Paulo argues, knowledge must come from concrete problems and situations experienced by subjects in their contexts.

Thus, in this category we seek to understand the school's relationship with life, because when trying to understand, study, work in a place where people build and spend part of their lives together, this understanding refers to the experience of life, living, and human formation.

4 FINAL REMARKS

The meanings ascribed to school from the perspective of students can be considered at three levels: school as a space to learn more and more; school that helps in the future; school that provides choices and helps in their life projects. Learning built in Physical Education classes and the meanings ascribed by students to that curriculum component can be summarized as follows: (1) physical and sports practices: stretching activities and those related to sports; (2) respect, support and overcoming; (3) a moment for body freedom; (4) health and the possibility to take care of one's body and oneself and have a healthy life, (5) leisure and construction of this space within school and the community. Similarly, students highlighted some elements that contribute to significant learning to be built both in Physical Education classes and in other curriculum components: good explanations on the part of teachers; teachers' concern with teaching rather than "conveying the subject"; dynamic classes (not just copying from the blackboard and brief explanations); building bonds between teachers and students; among others.

For teachers, meanings ascribed to school and Physical Education are multiple and based on experiences and reflections of their practice and what they do in those classes, in educational processes, in their life stories, among other constituent elements of teaching. Some of the significances conferred by teachers were: school understood as an educating and helping institution, as one of the places for construction of knowledge that allows changing society and the formation of critical and reflective students, that allows working in an collective and interdisciplinary way, that balances humankind's historically accumulated knowledge with

the reality experienced by students. Based on this, it was possible to understand that Physical Education is becoming a curricular component in school, being perceived as a space to provoke discussions that suggest a search for meaning, once filled by physical activity and the hegemonic practice of sports.

The narratives are distant in the very meanings that teachers ascribe to school, how they perceive themselves in that context and what they can accomplish in their pedagogical practices. On the other hand, narratives converge when highlighting the importance of collective action and the learning achieved with peers in this context. Thus, teachers seem to share the meanings ascribed to school and education when they narrate that teaching is not built in isolation and that such institution challenge them in the need to think/organize/realize their actions in coordination with each other. In this sense, some teachers' narratives presented alternatives based on collectively shared projects.

Finally, I underscore the relationship between education and school. What happens and what is done in the school context is related to subjects' education or, as noted by Morin (2007), with building ways and actions that allow and contribute to the formation and development of a being human. To allow contributing, collaborating, proposing the formation and development of the subject is to deal with human life, i. e., with lives that intersect in a historical moment and in a specific context. Thus, education, formation and development can be conceived based on building relationships between subjects who educate and are educated, who change and are changed, who learn and teach in a direct relationship with themselves, with others and with the world.

We could understand that the human challenge of educating and participating in the process of formation and development of subjects – mediated by the construction of social relations – seems to be on the agenda of a continuously incomplete and inconclusive social practice, given the size of human incompleteness and life's contingencies.

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