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SPECIAL ISSUE: WHAT WOULD A SOCIALLY JUST EDUCATION SYSTEM LOOK LIKE?

GUEST EDITORS: BECKY FRANCIS AND MARTIN MILLS

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Can critical democracy last? Porto Alegre and the struggle over 'thick' democracy in education

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A fundamental question lies at the heart of the issues surrounding the connections between educational projects and larger socially critical movements and projects. What would a socially just education system look like? In answering this, one place immediately comes to mind, a locale where this question was answered through real transformations: the municipal educational system of Porto Alegre, Brazil. This article examines the structural changes that were put in place in Porto Alegre's municipal system during the 16-year tenure of the Popular Administration (a coalition of left-wing parties, led by the Workers Party that governed the city from 1989 to 2004) and offers a preliminary evaluation of the current state of the schools in Porto Alegre. Among the questions we address are: How did these changes come about? What were the components of the Porto Alegre experience? What did it achieve? What is its legacy? What has lasted? What does this tell us about the prospects for socially committed critical reforms? To answer these questions, we first situate Porto Alegre in its context. We then examine why Porto Alegre's educational system deserves to be studied and what it achieved. We also present some challenges that the experience is currently facing and finally we revisit the Porto Alegre school system six years after the Workers Party left office and address both some of what has lasted and what has changed.

Keywords: democracy; educational policy; progressive educational reform; schooling system

Introduction

Creating a path to what has been called 'real utopias' (Wright 2010) is not easy. But doing so is absolutely crucial if we are to reconstruct our economic, political, and cultural institutions so that they become sites of serious critically democratic transformation. For those who have labored for years to connect movements in and around education with larger social movements for equality (see, e.g. Anyon 2005; Apple 2006; Apple, Au, and Gandin 2009; Lipman 2011), understanding the limits and possibilities of these connections have been a central focus.

A fundamental question lies at the heart of the issues surrounding the connections between educational projects and larger socially critical movements and projects. What would a socially just education system look like? In answering this, one place immediately comes to mind, a locale where this question was answered

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through real transformations: the municipal educational system of Porto Alegre, Brazil (Gandin 2009, 2010; Gandin and Apple 2002). This article examines the structural changes that were put in place in Porto Alegre's municipal system during the 16-year tenure of the Popular Administration (a coalition of left-wing parties, led by the Workers Party that governed the city from 1989 to 2004) and offers a preliminary evaluation of the current state of the schools in Porto Alegre. Among the questions we want to address are: How did these changes come about? What were the components of the Porto Alegre experience? What did it achieve? What is its legacy? What has lasted? What does this tell us about the prospects for socially committed critical reforms?

To answer these questions, we first situate Porto Alegre in its context. We then examine why Porto Alegre's educational system deserves to be studied and what it achieved. We also present some challenges that the experience is currently facing and finally we revisit the Porto Alegre school system six years after the Workers Party left office and address both some of what has lasted and what has changed.

Context and the conditions for educational transformation

Porto Alegre is a city of 1.4 million people, situated in the southern region of Brazil. It is the capital of the state of Rio Grande do Sul, and it is the main city of the fourth largest metropolitan area in Brazil, with almost four million people.

From 1989 to 2004, Porto Alegre was 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 and grassroots movements, and other leftist organizations). PT was reelected three consecutive times. In October 2004, the Workers Party was defeated in the municipal election and a new (centrist) group came to power. As we will examine below, this new political group was elected promising not to change the major set of policies implemented by PT, something that clearly shows that the policies are already organic to the life of Porto Alegre.

Like any other large city in Brazil, Porto Alegre has a significant percentage of its population living below the poverty line. Despite the sharp reduction in poverty in the last eight years, in 2009 Porto Alegre had 25.7% of its population living under the poverty line (IPEA 2009). The 'rural exodus,' the massive population leaving from rural areas to the cities that was caused not only by the increase in urban jobs but also by a total degradation of the rural situation, made the cities grow rapidly in Brazil. The industrial boom of the 1940s and 1950s and the economic growth of the early 1970s (called the 'economic miracle' in Brazil) attracted the rural population to the cities. With the end of the 'economic miracle' in the late 1970s, a large group of the population that had migrated to the cities were left without jobs and without any state safety net. No growth in the industrial and services jobs could keep up with the rate of migration from the countryside to the cities. A great number of these people ended up in the *favelas*, rapidly forming in the outskirts of the cities.

Over the years, the educational neglect of this population became even more critical. The system of municipal schools was expanded and now they are almost exclusively located in the *favelas* (or *vilas*, as they are called locally) of Porto Alegre, serving the population that live in extreme poverty. The expansion of the municipal system occurred during the tenure of the Popular Administration. In fact, a significant number of schools were constructed as a concrete result of the participatory budgeting process (part of the participatory democracy structures created by

the Popular Administration, where delegates vote on where the city should invest part of its budget. For more see Abers (1998), Baiocchi (2005) and Santos (1998). A number of neighborhoods prioritized the construction of schools in their assemblies. The fact that the schools were constructed in those neighborhoods is both a victory of the organization of those communities and a political commitment of the Popular Administration.

Historically, the educational decision-making process in Brazil has been dominated by a very centralized system. 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), or for principals in schools. The curriculum is usually defined by the departments 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.

In terms of educational opportunities, Brazil has recently dramatically improved the initial access to schools (close to 97% of school-age students enter formal education). But the indices of failures and dropouts are frightening. This reality is where the central purpose of the municipal school system 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 was central to the Popular Administration's project of constructing new relations between state, schools, and communities. The educational policy was then organically linked to and considered a major part of the larger process of transforming the whole city. This is a crucial point, one that makes Porto Alegre especially important to critical educational theory, policies, and practices. Educational transformation was closely connected to a larger project of substantive social change.

Dealing with the excluded members of Brazilian society, the proponents of the educational policy in Porto Alegre had a clear and explicit project of transformation. The Citizen School (the title of the educational proposal for the city taken by two of the four Workers Party administrations, and used by us here to identify the structure of the transformed educational system) was constructed explicitly as an alternative to the global ideology of marketization that surrounded education. The notion of citizenship was used overtly as a way of opposing neoliberalism's views of knowledge as a commodity and students and parents as simply consumers. The goal of the Citizen School project was to create *citizens*, but with citizenship being redefined as guaranteeing the rights of people to have material goods necessary for survival, symbolic goods necessary for their subjectivity, and political goods necessary for their social existence (Azevedo 1999b, 16).

When forming the group that would lead education in the city of Porto Alegre, the Popular Administration did not put in place bureaucrats or administrators without experience in schools in the Municipal Secretariat of Education (SMED). On the contrary, the group that initiated the Citizen School project was formed by teachers with a history of participation in social movements and engagement with democratic experiences in teachers' unions. As a former Porto Alegre secretary of education says,

The Citizen School project is not a product of a group of enlightened administrators that had formulated and executed a 'new proposal'. It is not, as well, a spontaneous construction, without intentionality. (...) The Citizen School nourished itself from and was inspired by theoretical/practical contributions of progressive academics, by

contributors in the public schools, and by the experiences of democratic and transformative struggle of social movements. Many of the builders of the Citizen School were actors of the movements in unions, communities, and in the popular trenches of the struggle for redemocratization of the country. (Azevedo 1999a, 12-3)

The political origin of the coordinators of the Citizen School is an important factor in the democratic component of the proposal. Many of the participants had experienced years of struggle as leaders of Rio Grande do Sul - Sindicato dos Trabalhadores em Educação (Center of the State of Rio Grande do Sul Teachers - Workers in Education Trade Union), the teachers' union of the state schools, certainly the strongest and one of the largest in the country. Their experience constituted one of the reasons for a clear political will to construct participatory and democratic alternatives. In fact, although the SMED played an essential role in coordinating the actions of the schools and pushing a democratic agenda, the principles that officially guided the SMED's actions were created *collectively* with active participation of teachers, school administrators and staff, students, and parents in institutionalized forums for democratic decision-making.

In what follows, we examine the main characteristics of the experience, for these are exactly the reasons that made it into a socially just educational system worth studying.

What made Porto Alegre a crucial example of progressive educational reform?

(1) *Unlike most reforms, Porto Alegre's experience was not only participatory in the implementation of the policy, but also in the creation of the policy and its goals as well.*

In order to construct the principles that would guide the actions of the municipal educational system of Porto Alegre, a democratic, deliberative, and participatory forum called the School Constituent Assembly was created. This project was constituted through a long process of mobilization of the school communities. It employed the invaluable lessons learned in the mobilization for participatory budgeting, a process where all people who can be affected by a budget decision are deeply involved in deliberating over it. The goal was the generation of the principles that would guide the policy for the municipal schools in Porto Alegre.

The process of organization of the School Constituent Assembly took a good deal of time. The whole process started in March 1994, lasted 18 months, and involved four developments: (1) thematic groups in the schools; (2) regional meetings; (3) a School Constituent Assembly central meeting; and (4) the elaboration of the schools' internal regulation. The themes that guided the discussion were the management of the school, curriculum, principles for living together, and evaluation.

The first phase was conducted at the local level with participants from every segment of the school and was coordinated by the newly created school council. The second phase gathered the schools by regions of the city. At this stage, each region formulated proposals to be submitted to the Assembly. In the third phase of the Constituent Assembly, the regions presented their proposals, and through a process of participatory democratic deliberation, 700 delegates (the members of the SMED were not allowed to vote) constructed 98 principles.¹ These principles constituted the desiderata for the education of Porto Alegre to be implemented in the practical life of the schools. The fourth phase constituted the creation (or re-

creation) of the schools' internal regulations, in a highly participatory way. This phase represented the materialization of the principles created in the Constituent Assembly in the regulation of daily life in the schools.

The concept of the Citizen School was one where there was no separation between the determination of the goals and the creation of the mechanisms to implement these goals. Rather, the process of generating the practical goals was to represent in itself an innovative mechanism that would be able to produce transformations in the relationships between the schools and the community. The normative goals that would guide the practice in the schools were collectively created through a highly participatory process. The idea was to foster a government that creates channels for real development of collectively constructed normative goals and that replaces the traditional relationship of distant government officials managing schools that they know little about.

The Constituent Assembly selected the radical democratization of education in the municipal schools as the main normative goal of the municipal educational system. This radical democratization would have to occur in three dimensions: democratization of access to schools, democratization of knowledge, and democratization of management. These three principles would be the ones guiding every action in the municipal system of Porto Alegre. And these three principles would have the impact of changing the structure of the schools and of the relationship between schools and the SMED. New mechanisms would have to be created to implement these goals.

(2) *Porto Alegre problematized concretely the prevailing common sense views of poor students from favelas and their communities. The Popular Administration understood that the material state of the buildings and teachers' working conditions and professional development were an essential part of the changes that were necessary in the way the state acts in these neighborhoods.*

In the *vilas* (or *favelas*), where the majority of dwellings have plywood, cardboard, or zinc walls, the school building is the most well constructed in the neighborhood. The school can become, therefore, a place for the community to meet, engage in sports, and participate in cultural activities. Whereas in other school systems (Brazil has both municipal and state public school systems) the school is usually completely separate from the community, in the Porto Alegre experience the education secretariat constantly found ways to expand and create new channels for the relationship between the school and the community. In this way, the schools actually served not only the students, but also the communities in which they are situated. As the leader of a neighborhood association told one of us in an interview taped during the Popular Administration's tenure:

We are very proud of this school. We fought really hard, through the Participatory Budgeting assemblies, to have this school built. The school was built because we were organized and demanded it. (...) We have a very good relationship with teachers and administration, and the whole community uses the school for meetings, for practicing sports, and for all kinds of cultural activities. We take a good care of it, because we consider it ours.

As the neighborhood association leader pointed out, another illustration of democratizing access not only to students but to all the community is the concept

of the school as a cultural center, which brings to the building performances and activities that otherwise would not have a space to be enacted.

The 'care' that the communities dedicate to the schools is readily apparent as well. While state schools are constantly damaged, robbed, and vandalized, the municipal schools are almost never targeted in this manner. The majority of the school buildings do not have any significant problems, and even the older ones are in very good condition. This is not something to be taken for granted. All over the country, and even in the state schools in Porto Alegre, there are complaints from teachers, students, and parents about the material conditions.

In interviews conducted by one of us, students confirmed the remarkable difference in conditions between the municipal and state schools. When asked how they felt in this school, one of the students declared, and the others strongly agreed with him:

This school is much more organized than the one I attended last year. The food is very good; we did not have lunch at the other school, only a snack. (...) This school is also really clean; the bathrooms are very clean and always have toilet paper and paper for you to dry your hands. We did not have any of that in the other school.

The above list of items may seem banal, but the students clearly understand that these material conditions say a good deal about how the school views and treats students. In this school, students feel welcomed. But they had more to say:

I think that other schools should be like this as well; a school where you have a good relationship with the administration, teachers, cleaning personnel, cooks. We feel that they all care about us. (...) This is just like a private school.

These students openly express that they understand that this school is different from the others. This is a school that 'cares about them.' They mention private schools because in the prevalent cultural model in Brazil, private schools are the best schools that one can attend. They have the best material conditions, what are thought to be the most dedicated teachers, and the most extracurricular activities. By using this comparison, these students show clearly that they understand that theirs is a good school and that they are proud to attend it.

This is crucial. But the way teachers are treated also tells a great deal about the seriousness of a socially just educational reform. In order to prepare for the participation of the teachers in the project, the Popular Administration and the education secretariat also implemented a process of 'formation' (ongoing teacher development and education) on the job and, just as critically, a policy of better salaries.

In terms of formation, every year the education secretariat promoted two seminars dealing with themes closely linked to the challenges faced by schools. During these seminars, all classes were suspended, and the teachers were stimulated to participate. One of the seminars occurred in March, and was used to bring Brazilian researchers to the event. The other occurred in July and had an international character. The idea was to bring the best progressive researchers in education to have discussions with the teachers. The International Seminar was considered one of the best (if not the best) of the Brazilian seminars in the field of education, attracting not only teachers from the municipal schools, but also teachers from the private and state systems, professors, and researchers from various regions of the country. These seminars allowed municipal teachers to have contact with national and international 'state-of-the-art' progressive educational research, something that was not common

at all in Brazil at that time. Continuous education of the teachers in terms of educational theory was part of the policy in Porto Alegre.

Besides the seminars, the education secretariat promoted 'formation' (ongoing collective teacher education) meetings, 10 per year, in every school, so teachers had a space to learn from their mistakes and successes and to discuss pedagogical issues connected to the reality of the school. The teachers' contracts were also changed to allocate 5 h per week to planning and studying.

Another aspect that helped to guarantee the thoughtful and committed performance of teachers was the salary policy. Teachers in public schools in Brazil had suffered tremendous salary reductions. Salaries in state schools were extremely low, leading people to characterize teachers as 'the new poor'. The Popular Administration knew that this was a crucial point. If teachers are literally struggling to survive, how could they become involved in a process of participation and transformation that demands more from them as professionals and promotes discussions of injustice in their classrooms if their own economic situation is not discussed? The salary of municipal school teachers became much higher than state school teachers during the Popular Administration's tenure. This salary was two to three times higher during that period. Indeed, the difference is even higher today, because of the absence of increases in state school teachers' salaries. A teacher with 18 years of experience in a municipal school, working 40 h a week (and the Popular Administration encouraged teachers to work 40 h during their tenure) earned (and still does) as much as or even more than a university professor. This clearly shows how comparatively well-paid teachers were (and still are) in the municipal schools.

By valuing teachers, changing the whole environment of the schools, involving the community with the school as a public institution, and insisting that every student counts, the Porto Alegre system attained its goal of democratizing access to school. In doing so, it made possible a level of access to public benefits that were not previously available to its students.

(3) In the Porto Alegre experience, there was a combination of mobilization from civil society and changes in the state agencies in order to incorporate the communities' needs. It is a classic case where the state itself is 'educated', an ongoing education that was caused both by the development of the policy it implemented and by community organizations and movements.

The school council was a central part of the democratization of the decision-making process and management in education in Porto Alegre. A product of the political will of the Popular Administration and the demands of social movements involved in education in the city, the School Councils that were established by a municipal law in December of 1992 and implemented in 1993 are the most important institutions in the schools. These structures, which are still in place today, are formed by elected teachers, school staff, parents, students, and by one member of the school administration. They combine consultative, deliberative, and monitoring functions. The school council reserves 50% of its seats for teachers and staff and 50% for parents and students. One seat is guaranteed to the administration of the school, usually the principal who is elected by all members of the school.² The rules concerning parents and students, both in determining who can vote and who can be elected, are the following: students who are 12 years old or more and parents or

legal guardians of students who are less than 16 years old can vote and be elected. The inclusiveness of this is unusual, as is the explicit move not to infantilize youth.

As mentioned above, the task of the school council is to deliberate about the global projects for the school, the basic principles of administration, to allocate economic resources, and to monitor the implementation of the decisions. The principal and her/his team are responsible for the implementation of these policies defined by the school council.

In terms of resources, it is important to say that, before the Popular Administration took office, a strict process of centralized control over budgets was extremely common in Brazil. Every expense, even simple daily ones, had to be sent to the central administration before it was approved. Then, the money was sent to the school, or a central agency would purchase the product or the service necessary. In such a system, the school council would have 'its hands tied,' with no autonomy at all. The SMED changed this structure and established a new policy to make a specified amount of money available to each school every three months. According to the SMED, this was an important measure. It institutionalized the financial autonomy of the schools, and allowed the schools to manage their expenditures according to the goals and priorities established by the school council. At the same time that it created autonomy, this measure gave parents, students, teachers, and staff who are present in the council a sense of social responsibility in administering public money. It taught them to prioritize the investments with solidarity in mind (SMED 1999b).

Along with the financial tasks, the school council is in charge of creating real participation of the school community in the decisions and even to propose school curricula. Furthermore, the school council also has the power to monitor the implementation – through the principal and her/his team – of its decisions (SMED 1993, 3) As an empowered structure in the schools, the school council is the main governance mechanism inside the schools. It is limited only by the legislation and the policies for education collectively constructed in democratic fora. Decisions about the curriculum can be part of the deliberation, and the inclusion of parents, students and staff, along with teachers in this process is a powerful innovation of the model.

It should be clear from the description above that participation in the school council demands a certain level of technical knowledge. In order to enhance both the quantity and the quality of the participation of parents, the SMED has been promoting municipal meetings of the school councils. This is a space where parents, students, and teachers and staff can acquire the tools and construct the necessary knowledge to administer the schools. It also generates a place where all of these representatives meet and share their knowledge and their doubts. In principle, this allows for a larger perspective beyond a corporatist or a 'localist' view. Furthermore, the SMED established a permanent program of continuing reflective education for *all* of the members of the school councils inside the schools. This too provides an additional space for the education of the councilors. Finally, in order to increase participation even more, the SMED put in place policies to stimulate the organization of each segment in their associations or unions, a practice that gives the councilors more representativeness.

This new structure exemplifies a crucial point surrounding the reforms that were instituted. It shows that the local state took the position that if education is not up to the level one expects, a significant element that has to be changed is the way the state itself thinks about and implements policy. In essence, the state has to *learn from* the organized social movements and from parents and students in schools.

Once again, this dialectical and dynamic practice of democracy is highly unusual, especially in systems that have long histories of top-down state control, even when such control is supposedly aimed at 'progressive' goals. Together with the school council, there is another structure created to guarantee democratic spaces in the municipal schools. In Porto Alegre, the whole school community elects the principal by direct vote. In this way, the person actually responsible for the implementation of the decisions of the school council, i.e. the principal, is her/himself elected. Thus, she or her must publicly propose and defend a particular project of administration for the school.

There is increased legitimacy that comes from this fact. The principal is not someone who necessarily represents the interests of the central administration inside the school councils, but someone with a majority of supporters inside that particular educational community. Principals then have a great degree of embeddedness and because of this the SMED feels that it is possible to avoid the potential problem of having someone responsible for the concretization of the deliberations occurring in the school councils who is not connected with the project. But the responsibility of the community does not stop there. Through the school council, the school community has ways of monitoring the activities of the principal and holding her/him responsible for implementing its democratic decisions. The direct election of the one responsible to implement the directives created by the school council, which is itself also elected directly by the school community, represents a mechanism that aims at generating the principle of democratic governance at the local level of the school even more.

(4) The experience in Porto Alegre was centrally interested in students' inclusion and academic success. But, unlike many other reforms, it understood very well that these goals could not be achieved without a radical discussion of and change in what counts as knowledge, whose knowledge is part of the formal and informal school experience, and how to create a new relationship between popular knowledge and academic knowledge.

In order to democratize access both to the school and to a broader choice of knowledge, the SMED started in 1995 to propose a new organization for the municipal schools. Instead of keeping the traditional structure of grades with the duration of one year (first to eighth in 'fundamental' education), the idea was to adopt a new structure called cycles of formation. It is important to note that the idea of reorganizing the curriculum and the space time of the schools in cycles instead of grades did not originate from Porto Alegre. It was an idea that was implemented in Belo Horizonte, another city governed by the Workers Party, and was being implemented in other countries such as Spain. That it was already discussed at a national level is made clear by the fact that the cycles of formation were listed as one of the possible alternatives for school configuration that would later appear in the National Educational Guidelines and Framework Law approved in 1996. Thus, what the Citizen School was implementing was not new per se, but a new configuration that, according to the SMED, would offer a substantially better opportunity for dealing with the need for democratization of access and of knowledge.

The administrators at the Secretariat were convinced that the issue of access to schools could be dealt with in a much better way using cycles. According to the SMED, 'the cycle structure offers a better way of dealing seriously with student failure, because its educational perspective respects, understands, and investigates

the socio-cognitive processes that the students go through' (SMED 1999a, 11). The idea was that by using a different conception of learning/time, the Citizen School would not punish students for being 'slow' in their process of learning. In this new configuration, by in essence recognizing the social nature of temporality, the traditional deadline of the end of each academic year when the students had to 'prove' that they had 'learned' was eliminated in favor of a different time organization.

The democratization of knowledge was also addressed by the adoption of the cycles. In the SMED's words, 'The cycles of formation contribute to the respect of the rhythm, the timing, and the experiences of each student, enhancing the collective organization and interdisciplinarity in the schools' (SMED 1999a, 10). The establishment of the cycles was a conscious attempt to eliminate the mechanisms in schools that perpetuate exclusion, failure, and dropouts, as well as the blaming of the victim that accompanies these.

How do the cycles of formation actually work in the Citizen School? The schools have three cycles of three years each, something that adds one year to fundamental education (one year of early childhood education inside the schools, expanding fundamental education to nine years). This makes the municipal schools responsible for the education of children from 6 to 14 years old. The three cycles are organized based on the 'cycles of life': each one corresponds to one phase of development, i.e. childhood, preadolescence and adolescence. The idea is to group together students of the same age in each of the years of the three cycles. This aims at changing the reality in the majority of public schools that cater to popular classes in Brazil, a reality with which the SMED had to deal when the Popular Administration started to govern the city. It was immediately faced with the fact that students with multiple failures were consistently placed inside classrooms intended for much younger children. Through organizing education by age, having students of the same age in the same year of the cycle, the SMED aimed to remotivate those students who had failed multiple times and to fight against the common sense idea that there are prerequisites to be learned without which it is impossible to apprehend the forms of knowledge next in line. As one of the Secretaries of Education said, 'instead of punishing the student because he/she did not learn, the Citizen School aims at valorizing the already acquired knowledge' (Azevedo 2000, 129).

In the schools using these cycles, students progress from one year to another within one cycle; the notion of 'failure' was eliminated. Despite this victory, the SMED understood that the elimination of mechanisms of exclusion was not enough to achieve the goal of democratization of knowledge. Because of this, the Citizen School created several mechanisms that aim at guaranteeing the inclusion of students. It established progression groups for the students who have discrepancies between their age and what they have learned. The idea was to provide the students who have experienced multiple failures in the past with a stimulating and challenging environment where they can learn at their own pace and fill the gaps in their academic formation that exist because of the multiple failures they experienced. Furthermore, the progression groups are also a space for the students who come from other school systems (from other city or state schools, for example) and have experienced multiple failures to be given more close attention so that they are ultimately integrated into the cycles that correspond more closely to their age. The idea here is that the school has to change its structure to adapt to the students, and not the reverse, which has been historically the case (Souza et al. 1999, 24-5).

This idea of constructing a new structure to better respond to students' needs led to the creation of another entity: the Learning Laboratory. This is a space where students with more serious learning problems get individual attention, but also a place where teachers conduct research in order to improve the quality of the regular classes. For the students with special needs, there are the integration and resources rooms, which 'are specially designed spaces to investigate and assist students who have special needs and require complementary and specific pedagogic work for their integration and for overcoming their learning difficulties' (SMED 1999a, 50).

Curriculum transformation was also a crucial part of Porto Alegre's project to build 'thick democracy.' It is important to say that this dimension was not limited to access to traditional knowledge. A new epistemological understanding about what counts as knowledge was constructed as well. It was not based on a mere incorporation of new knowledge within the margins of an intact 'core of humankind's wisdom,' but on a radical transformation. The Citizen School project went beyond the mere episodic mentioning of cultural manifestations or class, racial, sexual, and gender-based oppression. It included these themes as an essential part of the process of construction of knowledge.

In the Citizen School, the notion of 'core' and 'periphery' in knowledge was 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 terms of perspective as well. The whole educational process aimed at inverting previous priorities and instead was organized to serve historically oppressed and excluded groups. The starting point for this new process of knowledge construction was the idea of thematic complexes. This organization of the curriculum is a way of having the whole school working on a central generative theme, from which the disciplines and areas of knowledge, in an interdisciplinary effort, will structure the focus of their content.

The schools were encouraged to follow steps for the construction of the thematic complex and for the translation of the macro discussions into curriculum. These steps included acknowledging the context where the school is situated by conducting participatory research to gather the themes important to this community. From this research the curriculum of each knowledge area and cycle year was developed. Through this process of research performed by teachers in the communities where the schools are situated, the themes that interest and/or concern the community were gathered. After this process of gathering the statements of the members of the community, teachers follow a set of criteria to select the most significant themes that can be extracted from these statements. The most significant statements were selected by the collective of teachers participating in discussions specifically allocated for this, discussions that guided the construction of the thematic complex.

At the time, SMED emphasized that the disciplines or areas of knowledge were not to be ignored or collapsed in the curriculum. What happened instead is that all knowledge areas became subordinate to a global idea, to a thematic core that was rather complex because it represents the center of the preoccupations and/or interests of the community where the school is situated. All the areas, and in fact, the entire school, are guided by the discussion and problematization around the thematic complex. This thematic complex provides the whole school with a central focus that guides the curriculum for a period of time that can be one semester or an entire academic year.

After having determined the principles and the larger contribution of each knowledge area for the discussion of the thematic complex, a conceptual matrix was formed. This is a web of concepts from each knowledge area, one that integrates what could be isolated facts or information that the teachers may understand are essential to use when dealing with the thematic complex. Using the thematic complex in combination with the conceptual matrix, teachers would have meetings that were at first organized by their knowledge areas and by each year in the cycles, to elaborate and plan the curriculum. Therefore, teachers had to 'study' their own knowledge areas and elect the concepts that would help to problematize the thematic complex. They also had to work collectively with teachers of other areas in order to assemble a curriculum that was integrated and dense enough to simultaneously address the issues listed in the thematic complex.

According to one of the key figures of this conceptualization, in the context of the Citizen School project 'the thematic complex brings about the perception and comprehension of the reality and makes explicit the worldview that all the ones involved in the process have' (Rocha as cited in SMED 1999a, 21). Rather than starting from the contribution of each discipline to the construction of knowledge, the thematic complex created a situation in which all teachers needed to step back and consider what the knowledge of their area could offer to better deal with the central issue elected to be the thematic complex. Because the thematic complex was closely related to social problems, the process created a situation in which teachers had to search for the relation of their discipline to social reality as a whole. Finally, because the starting point for the thematic complex was popular knowledge or common sense, teachers had also to think about the relation between official knowledge and this common sense. Therefore, this approach dealt simultaneously with three problems of traditional education in Porto Alegre and elsewhere: the fragmentation of knowledge, the 'apparent' neutrality of school content, and the absolute supremacy that traditional schools grant to 'scientific/erudite knowledge' over local knowledge of the communities, especially very impoverished ones.

The Citizen School project conceived the organization of the curriculum around a thematic complex not only as a form of generating alternative knowledge inside the curriculum, but also as a form of political intervention. As Goroditch and Souza (1999, 78) put it:

To teach using thematic complexes not only generates the possibility of selecting knowledge that is significant to students but also presents us with the perspective of having a tool for analysis that can help students to organize the world they live in, so that they can understand it and act upon it through a critical, conscious, and collective social practice.

In the process of democratizing both curricular content and organization, the traditional rigid disciplinary structure was broken and general interdisciplinary areas were created. These areas of study were given the names of social expression, biological, chemical and physical sciences, socio-historic, and logic-mathematical. Using the thematic complex, the students did not study history or social and cultural studies through books that never address the real problems and interests they have. Through the organization in thematic complexes, the students could learn history by beginning with the historical experience of their families. They studied important social and cultural content by focusing on and valorizing their own cultural realities, productions, histories, and lives. A real shift occurred because the

focus was not on the 'core/official' knowledge organized around dominant class and race visions of the world, but on the real problems and interests of the students and the community.

It is important to note that these students still learned the history of Brazil and the world, including 'high' culture, but these would be seen through different lenses. Their culture was not forgotten in order for them to learn 'high status' culture. Rather, by understanding their situation and their culture and valuing it, these students were able to simultaneously learn *and* would have the chance to transform their situation of exclusion. By studying the problems (rural exodus, living in illegal lots, etc.) and not stopping there, but also examining the strengths of self-organization (in neighborhood associations, in cultural activities and groups, in political actions, etc.), the Citizen School helped to construct alternatives for the communities living in terrible conditions. This new model of where knowledge comes from aims at problematizing the notion of 'official knowledge' (Apple 2000) by shifting the center of discussion to the lived experiences of the dispossessed.

This shift in what is considered the core or the center of knowledge affected not only the pedagogical conception that guided the daily life in the classrooms; it also transformed how the school itself functions as a whole. This conception of knowledge was used throughout the entire school system during the Popular Administration's tenure. The project not only served the 'excluded' by generating a different formal education for students, but also served them by creating an innovative structure that made it possible for the community of those who have historically been excluded to regain their dignity (both material and symbolic).

Some challenges

The previous sections of this article focused on the ambitious policies and practices that were instituted in Porto Alegre. But we need to ask about the current situation of the Porto Alegre educational system. One of us has closely followed the situation and has encountered many encouraging signs that many of the principles of the transformation started during the Popular Administration's tenure have not been lost. The opening up of the schools to the communities and the ethic of care for the children and their many social problems are still strong in the schools. The schools' role as a reference for the communities and as a space that they consider their own are both alive and visible. Nevertheless, there are serious challenges to the policies and practices that were implemented, challenges that threaten the quality of the experience as a socially just educational system. We briefly examine two of the main problems in the municipal schools today.

The first issue is related to the school councils. In the schools (four schools in different parts of the city) currently being researched by one of us, the situation of the school councils is not very encouraging. In some schools there are not enough students or parents participating in the meetings. In the schools that have councils in which all members are elected, they rarely meet. And when they meet, most of them seem to ratify decisions taken by the school administration or even to simply sign off on the budgets of the administration's financial reports. In these four schools, it is hard to see important decisions being taken up by the council or an active and participatory school council itself. This is serious, since the school councils are the official gateway for the interests of parents and students in schools. In none of the four schools researched does the school council have active participa-

tion of more than a few parents and students. There are cases of involved parents, but this is the exception in the visited schools. It will be important to continue to monitor whether the feeling of not having anything to contribute ('What do I know?' was a sentence from a mother) that many mothers participating in schools councils expressed to Wilkinson (2007) in her continuing research. Wilkinson showed not an empowerment but an increased discrimination of mother's knowledge in the school councils she studied. This is cause for worry and represents the opposite of the schools councils' mandate.

The second problem is related to the curriculum. From the moment the cycles of formation were established by the Popular Administration, opposition forces claimed that it offered a less rigorous education for the poorest people, especially due to its no-failing policy. There is strong evidence showing that this was not the case during the Popular Administration's tenure (Gandin 2002). Rigorous evaluation coupled with mechanisms like the learning laboratories meant that the curriculum that was built and that took the communities' knowledge and concerns into consideration was guaranteeing that students would learn – at different pace, indeed – what was taught. In a series of recent visits to these four schools, it is possible to feel a different tone. One school in particular, a school that has a strong majority of teachers identified with the Popular Administration's policies, offers an example of what has become a serious problem. There have been substantive difficulties in transforming the school into a place where children are challenged intellectually *and* where children are cared for and feel protected. The curriculum coordinator of that school explicitly said in an interview that

We have given up on many teachers and do not believe they will change and seriously commit to the students. We now direct all our energy directly towards the kids, because they need the concreteness of someone believing in them. We make them feel welcome and many students still come to the school even when they have graduated.

As we mentioned above, this is something that is not unimportant, especially in those communities in which drug trafficking, vigilante actions, and police raids steal the lives of a significant number of children and adolescents. But it certainly represents a challenge in terms of offering students serious academic work that also connects knowledge to their lives).

However, we need to be careful with this critique, because the choices that the principals and curriculum coordinators face are extremely difficult. As the quote from an interview shows, many of them have been devoting all of their energy to creating an environment where children feel welcomed and are treated as valuable human beings, something that is not the case in other locales in their lives. One of us has documented the dilemma (although without the more political connotation present in this example) that women teachers face between professionalism and caring (Apple 1988), showing the risks both for teachers' work and for students. This is an even more difficult situation in Porto Alegre for, paradoxically, even when it is not always an overt choice on their part, by concentrating on 'caring,' these principals and curriculum coordinators in Porto Alegre do not simultaneously reinforce the academic message that all children can learn.

In visits to these schools, there was the clear sense that teachers were not demanding much from the students academically or even sending clear messages that they were coming from an environment that condemns them to stay where they

are. (As one example, one teacher said that she did not assign homework and that the notebooks were locked in the school and not sent to children homes, because teachers believed that these notebooks would not come back, or come back dirty or damaged, due to the living conditions of the children and the lack of care of their parents.) By combating traditional content-pushing and by not enforcing a more Freirian approach of being rigorous with the construction of knowledge process, there is the danger of recreating a situation where, in Freire's terms, poor students are 'ghettoized in their language.' Freire goes on:

In overromanticizing students' language so as to discourage them from acquiring multiple discourses, including the 'standard' discourse of the dominant society in which they live, teachers run the risk of becoming entrapped in a 'feel good' pedagogy that passes as progressive. If they do this, teachers are not engaging with their students in a mutual process of liberation. (Freire 1997, 305–6)

This danger is exactly what the Popular Administration and the SMED expressly fought against with their curricular policies. However, the current centrist administration started a process of trying to centrally establish a minimum curriculum for each cycle year. This obviously stands in direct opposition to the position of the Popular Administration in favor of a localized curriculum. Keeping a close watch on the developments surrounding this proposed change will be crucial to understand the direction that the administration will take toward the schools. Also crucial will be the reactions toward this proposal by the schools themselves and by the educators, communities, and students that have been transformed by the more critically democratic policies and practices that were institutionalized by the Popular Administration.

The problems mentioned above are not small obstacles. Clearly, it will be important to keep following these schools to see what happens with these and other problems of continuity in the Porto Alegre experience.

Some lessons from Porto Alegre?

As we said in the beginning of this article, on 1 January, a new centrist political coalition took office, ending the 16-year tenure of the Workers Party and the Popular Administration in Porto Alegre's City Hall. During the campaign one could not help but notice that the soon to be victorious candidate, José Fogaça, constantly said that he would 'maintain what was good and change what was not.' He promised that he would not touch the participatory budget which he labeled 'an achievement of the city.'

During the campaign, there were attacks on the way the municipal schools organized the times for learning. The opposition to PT claimed that education in Porto Alegre was not as strong as it was in the past, because of the no-failing policy in the schools. In his educational platform, Fogaça included the idea of 'revising the school cycles policy.' However, soon after the election, a survey was conducted with the teachers of the municipal schools and the vast majority of them said that they wanted the cycles to stay. In interviews by one of us of teachers who worked in the secretariat at the time, such strong support for the cycles was a surprise to the new administration and they decided to maintain the cycle's policy.

The new administration took a hands-off approach, leaving the schools open to decide on their curricular organization. It did not enforce, as the PT administrations

did, both the thematic complexes and the research in the communities as the centerpieces of curriculum design. For many teachers identified with the Popular Administration, there was a clear political meaning to the government's policy. It was seen as a strategy of destroying the PT policy without openly confronting it. By not conveying any clear policy to the schools, the current administration would end up emptying out the previous proposal's meanings. In fact, the vast majority of the schools started organizing the curriculum without resorting to the thematic complex.

Nevertheless, and this is more than a little significant, this same group of schools did *not* go back to the content-centered tradition prevalent before the PT governments were in power. Many schools have been using Freirian 'generative themes' (Freire 1993) actively researched by students through projects (see Hernandez and Ventura 1998). On the one hand, one could say that the projects involving such generative themes are not the same as the thematic complex that was made such a priority by the Popular Administration. For the Popular Administration, the complex was the ideal way of dealing with the difficulties of reading the word and the world simultaneously. But on the other hand, it is equally plausible to see this as compelling evidence that the schools of Porto Alegre learned the lesson of the need to build the curriculum locally and democratically in a profound way. While they are not necessarily repeating and/or reinventing what the Popular Administration conceived, they are indeed keeping many of the principles intact.

This is just one indication that, despite some opposition from groups of schools and teachers during the Popular Administration's tenure, after the PT government was gone the majority of the schools maintained the basic structure of the proposal. Teachers say openly in interviews that they miss having an administration with a clear vision for education, even if they did not necessarily agree with all the principles that were put forward.

Perhaps one of the most important lessons from Porto Alegre is that the state was absolutely necessary to institutionalize the changes and protect the schools from an international and federal neoliberal agenda, something that is absolutely crucial to remember in a time of neoliberal attacks on the entire public sphere. But this lesson could not exist without another equally significant one. Real transformation comes when the state is no longer the origin of the transformations. It is when teachers in schools start living the premise of democracy, when they build curriculum with the students and communities that real transformation happens (see also Apple and Beane 2007).

In the documentary *Žižek!* (2005), during a lecture in Argentina, Slavoj Žižek says the following about utopia:

True utopia emerges when there are no ways to resolve the situation within the coordinates of the possible and, out of the pure urge to survive, you have to invent a new space. Utopia is not a free imagination; utopia is a matter of innermost urgency; you are forced to imagine something else as the only way out.

This conception of utopia seems to apply perfectly to the case of Porto Alegre and its social and educational transformations. Out of the real struggles in authoritarian times, out of the impossibility of constructing socially-just relations in the city within the prevailing patterns of the state/community relationship and the dominant institutional framework, the Popular Administration was forced to imagine and to act in utopian terms. They had to ask – and then to act upon – some of the

most crucial questions that can be raised in a time of neoliberal and neoconservative agendas. What if 'thick' democracy was truly implemented? What if the poorest citizens of the city could decide on where public money would be invested? What if the poorest neighborhoods would receive brand new schools and the best paid teachers in the state? What if the pedagogical notion that everyone can learn in school was implemented? What if what counts as knowledge was critically revisited and school organization was reconstructed based on this notion?

The educational system of Porto Alegre offered a real alternative to the apparent consensus of educational reform around market-based managerialism through economic accountability, competition, and choice. But it was and is not a utopia that comes from 'free imagination'; it emerges from the concrete struggle to create a socially-just educational system (see also Wright 2010). It certainly had many flaws and contradictions in its implementation, but what it has to offer is the radical idea that it is possible to break away from that forged (and at times forced) consensus, thus opening up the space for a new social and educational imaginary. It shows that new educational structures are truly possible within the existing educational systems – if social movements and political alliances are built that both challenge an accepted common sense and begin to create a new one (see also Apple 2009).

There is another implication that needs to be stated here, this one for research on educational policy. Too often research on policy – even research that is critically oriented – is based on relatively short time periods. Yet lasting transformations take time to accomplish. And their effects, especially those that are aimed expressly at substantial transformations in the relationship between the state and civil society, in the ways in which social movements and school realities interact, in the politics of knowledge, and in the fundamental place of education in social change, take years to show their long term effects. Not only do we need more instances of 'real utopias' such as that found in Porto Alegre, but we need many more studies of the 'long revolution' (Williams 1961) that such examples may exemplify and in which they participate.

Notes

1. These principles are listed in Azevedo (2000).
2. We will return to this theme of elected principals below, due to its importance in the democratic design of the education in Porto Alegre.

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