

Chapter 8

Catholic Education in Contemporary Brazil: A Story of Questions for Classroom Practice



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Abstract This chapter deals with the challenges of Catholic school education in Brazil, in a context of profound changes and strong ideological debates. It is a historical approach to what happened from the 1960s to the present. The formation of sufficiently prepared teachers, openness to inter-religious dialogue and inclusion are posed as some of the key challenges for the Catholic school in Brazil.

8.1 Introduction

The starting point of this chapter is a personal experience, in a basic education classroom of an elite Catholic institution in 1970, when due to the use of certain didactic materials the author was the reason for a “parent-teacher meeting”, which generated an embarrassing and ideological dialogue.

The question that guides this section is: what are the challenges for Catholic education in Brazil and its practices in the classroom that incorporate the different changing contexts and strong ideological debates, mainly from the 1960s to today?

With initial attention to the context of changes in the second half of the twentieth century, the chapter points out, in sequence, three special focuses: the national organization of Catholic education in a context of strong market competition; Catholic education in a context of accelerated religious diversification combined with the ever greater affirmation of secularity in society; and, finally, a recent debate on the most appropriate forms of socio-educational inclusion practices of Catholic and similar educational entities. The text concludes by pointing out challenges for advancing the process of reflection on classroom practices in Catholic education.

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8.2 The Second Half of the Twentieth Century: A Context of Great Changes

I am going to start with the account of a personal event. In 1970 I was teaching in a Catholic Jesuit school, known as an elite school, in southern Brazil. The subject was “Religious Culture”. I was guided to use, in the classroom, a very fashionable didactic material, very appropriate to the new moment that the Catholic Church was living since the Second Vatican Council and the Christian social commitment in the challenging context that Brazil and all Latin America were living. The classes were very successful, with good adhesion and participation of the students in the seventh year of primary education. However, one day I was surprised when the school management called me to a meeting with a group of parents. The issue was the ideological orientation of the materials used in class.¹ In that material, there were aspects of the social and cultural reality in a fairly balanced way and within the scope of the age group of the students, and that in the opinion of the parents, were not appropriate. I was a young beginner, half way through my Jesuit formation, at that time a student of Social Sciences at the local Federal University. I had to explain to some of those parents that the logo of the *Sono-Viso of Brazil*,² which was an S and a V, had nothing to do with the hammer and sickle and that the star of Bethlehem (the guide of the Three Kings) which appeared in a picture had nothing to do with any stars on the flags of communist countries. I felt tremendously moved by these totally unexpected intimidations. It was certainly a great learning experience.

Without getting stuck on this anecdote, I believe that it is tremendously symbolic and reflects a whole context that was lived, mainly from the second half of the twentieth century onwards, more precisely the political, cultural and social transformations, from the 1960s onwards. It was a context that left deep marks both for society and for the Catholic Church and other different Christian churches and, consequently, for Catholic and Christian education. According to Danilo R. Streck and Aldino L. Segala: “*A new way of being Church implied the belief that another society was possible; the society where all people could have enough bread and the thirst for justice could be satisfied*” (2007: 165).³

¹This was an innovative production in terms of catechesis. The so-called Catechetical Cards organized under the coordination of the specialist in the area, Brother Antonio Cechin (of the Marist Brothers’ Congregation). In one of his last interviews, Brother Antonio himself recalled how in 1969 the Minister of Education, brandishing these catechetical cards on television, shouted that they were highly subversive material destined to brainwash pre-adolescents for communism and pointed to Catholic schools as the main disseminators of these ideas.

²Entity hired by the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil (CNBB), for the first printing of that material.

³The basic outline of the present text reproduces the same logic of another recent publication, with the title “*Brazil, Catholic religion and education: challenges and prospects*” (Follmann 2017), in which I had the opportunity to synthesize in the first part the contribution of Streck and Segala (2007), here quoted. I take up here some passages of the 2017 article, with the novelty, on the one hand, of the reflection on the impacts in the classroom and, on the other, of the addition of the recent debate on the most appropriate forms of socio-educational inclusion practices.

In the same article, there is a special mention of the important role played by the Second Vatican Council and its intense impact on the Catholic Church in Latin America. This last aspect appears as the central point in the great change that has occurred, in this context, in theological and pedagogical terms, which is the focus of the authors' text.

Paulo Freire proclaimed that the education promoted by the churches should be conceived and carried out with roots in the history and culture of the people. According to him, "*the educational role of the churches cannot be understood as alien to the conditions of the concrete reality in which they are present*" (Freire 1977: 105, quoted by Streck and Segala 2007: 165).

Some documents of the episcopate of that time were of great importance, especially the documents of the Latin American Episcopal Conference (CELAM), of the meeting in Medellín, Colombia, in 1968 and of Puebla, Mexico, in 1979.⁴

The Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) and popular education are also points to be highlighted, in the text of Streck and Segala (2007). It was an extremely fertile period, particularly in terms of popular education activities outside the formal education system, largely led by the Church. At the same time, great debates were held within the formal system, as was seen in the great event in Buga, Colombia (1967), a year before the well-known content of the meeting of the bishops in Medellín (1968). The idea of liberation and liberating education, proclaimed and deepened in Buga, was taken up in the Medellín document. The main characteristics of this education were later taken up again in the Puebla document (1979), which synthesizes them in three points: creating space in the human being for the good Christian news; encouraging the exercise of the critical function inherent in true education; and promoting the learner as the subject of his own development and that of others. In short: education to humanize, education for justice and education for service.

Catholic education in Brazil had a great presence in secondary education. Oscar Beozzo (1993: 69) expresses that, at the end of the 1950s, in Brazil 80% of the students at this level were from Catholic educational institutions. Access was easier for the middle and upper classes, due to high fees. On the one hand, great internal ideological tensions were experienced, generating conflicts in the area of management and classroom practices. On the other hand, important debates were taking place on the democratization of education, including the importance of allocating public resources to private educational initiatives.

The management, however, was totally different. There was a large increase in the public education network and private schools were gradually excluded from access to public subsidies. In Catholic institutions, unable to take in students from the poorer sector, the ideological crisis that was already in place tended to grow. The new way of being a school, which came hand in hand with the new way of being Church, seemed to have become a distant discourse, in a picture where the survival of the schools and

⁴The document that today best expresses all the trajectory and advances lived in terms of the Church in Latin America in the last decades and its current situation is the document of Aparecida do Norte, Brazil, in 2007. In this sense, see Jaci de Fátima Candioto. *A Educação Cristã na atual Cultura a partir do Documento de Aparecida*. XI National Congress of Education (EDUCERE), 2013, PUC-PR.

their practices in the classroom needed to be adjusted to the consumption horizon of the dominant elites.

The ideological crisis in the schools was accompanied by two other crises. In the first place, the crisis of consecrated religious life itself, with a significant decrease in the number of vocations. In second place, the state policy of, on the one hand, investing more resources in public schools, and, on the other hand, facilitating the possibility of the emergence of a voracious market of private educational enterprises, guided by business and profit, weighed heavily.

These last two aspects implied an unprecedented worsening of the conditions of economic and financial sustainability of Catholic schools and other denominational and community schools. Paradoxically, these institutions are the ones most focused on public service. As an aggravating factor in this paradox, it is worth noting that the power of intimidation of the families who pay, in this context, becomes even more severe in relation to classroom practices.

8.3 Catholic Education in Brazil: National Organization and Competitiveness

The twenty-first century began with a totally unfavorable scenario for the economic and financial sustainability of Catholic educational institutions and other similar educational initiatives. According to Manoel Alves (2006), this scenario also made visible the internal management weaknesses of most of these institutions. For the author, this was not something noticeable in favorable times and without competition, but radical changes occurred and the context became adverse, especially during the last two decades of the twentieth century. It seems that the institutions of Catholic education were very slow to adapt to the new moment experienced by humanity as the “knowledge society”.

To face these great challenges, Catholic education in Brazil took important steps in terms of national organization. Thus, in 2007, the process of officially establishing the National Association of Catholic Education (ANEC) was definitively established, overcoming the situation of evident disarticulation that existed previously.⁵ This entity of unique national representation of Catholic education in Brazil is characterized by three main axes: political representation and defense of the interests of the associates, advice to the associates and support in the management of the institutions. ANEC is made up of 400 Catholic member supporters, about 2 thousand schools, 90 higher education institutions and 100 social works. ANEC is present in all

⁵El 30 de octubre de 2007 ocurrió la incorporación de la Asociación Brasileira de Escolas Superiores Católica (ABESC) y de la Asociación Nacional de Mantenedoras de Escolas Católica (ANAMEC) en la Asociación de Educación Católica (AEC), que pasó a denominarse a Asociación Nacional de Educación Católica do Brasil (ANEC), en funcionamiento con este nombre desde 2008.

Table 8.1 Composition of the Brazilian population in percentages according to religious identification in the official 1940 And 2010 demographic censuses

Religious identification	1940 (%)	2010 (%)
Catholics	95.2	64.6
Evangelicals	2.6	22.2
“Non-religious”	0.2	8.0
Other religions	2.0	5.2
Total	100.0	100.0

Source Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics Foundation (IBGE). Census of 1940 and 2010

states of the Federation, representing 2.2 million students and 100 thousand teachers and officials.⁶

The crisis, constituted by the theological and pedagogical transformation undergone by the Catholic Church, added to the drastic reduction in the number of consecrated religious and the radical change in the context of spaces for Catholic education and other confessions, are not the only fundamental elements that must be observed. The challenge of articulating forces at the national level for the creation of common support and synergy and, within the frenetic race of technological and pedagogical innovation in the classrooms and educational spaces as a whole, not to succumb to the loss of the central values that move Catholic education, was also pointed out above. All of this must be taken into account within a context of accelerated religious diversification and the advance of the lay State.

8.4 The Diversification of the Brazilian Religious Sphere and the Laicism of the State

The Brazilian religious sphere has suffered, over the last decades, a very accelerated process of inflection in forces: from a predominantly Catholic Brazil, it is moving towards a Brazil where the strength of the evangelical Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal segment and religious diversification in general, tend to conquer ever greater spaces.

In terms of diversification in the religious sphere, the official data consolidated at the national level are provided by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics Foundation (IBGE), from 1940 to 2010. In this period, the statistical table reflects the significant numerical fall of those who declare themselves to be Catholic and the accelerated increase of those who declare themselves to be Evangelicals, as well as the great increase of those who declare themselves to be “non-religious,” including, in the latter group, non-believers or atheists. The multiplication of the number of religions added to the table of “other religions” is also noted, as shown in the Table 8.1.

⁶See: <http://www.curtanaeducacao.org.br/realizacao/anec/>.

Everything indicates that in 2020 the Catholic population in Brazil will be below 50%.⁷ However, the explosion of religious diversity, which can be observed in contemporary Brazil, does not in itself generate a pluralistic spirit or democratic coexistence. On the contrary, on many occasions there are fundamentalist radicalizations. There is, then, a doubly contradictory movement generated by diversification: growth of the spirit of pluralist democratic coexistence, on the one hand, and an increase in fundamentalist radicalizations, on the other. In the same way, a double movement is perceptible at the level of the State: at the same time that there are verifiable movements for the maturing of laicism in the sense of guaranteeing the right to diversity and plurality of religious expressions, there are also movements in search of electoral advantages that have the support of this or that religious confession.

Knowledge plays an important role in the process of religious identity. Brazilian society needs to deepen its knowledge about the world of religions and different religiousnesses. This “world” has become very diversified in Brazil due, in part, to a more visible, although statistically very reduced, presence of Islamic, Jewish, Buddhist and other strong and millennia-old religious traditions. A fundamental component in the processes of religious identity is the healthy relationship with the other, with the different. Perhaps it can be said that inter-religious dialogue is the salvation table of a religious education that generates a healthy social life.

It is agreed that it is the task of the secular state to create the conditions for the education of religious consciences in their diversity and their mutual recognition. A mature secularity lived and administered by the State is a condition for the religious sphere to be able to exercise its role in the construction of a democratic society.

The installation of the secular State was mentioned within the same process of the proclamation of the Republic. It has been 130 years since the first Republican Constitution of 1891 and the secularity of the State is still far from mature. The history of the twentieth century and also of the first decade of the twenty-first century is full of examples that bring to light the “ghost” of Catholicism as the official religion. This was especially accentuated during the long period of the Vargas government, but to a certain extent it returned during the Lula government.⁸ In Brazil, this historical period of State secularism witnessed two complementary phenomena: the strong burden of preconceptions and persecutions (repressions) of African-based religions and others that were commonly disqualified as religions, not accepted by Western

⁷The research of the Data-Folha Institute of July 2018, Sao Paulo, Brazil shows 51% Catholics and 33% Evangelicals. In addition to the visible explosion in the number of evangelicals, other aspects must be considered, since there are still controversies regarding research methodologies, and the diversity may be even greater due to the multiplication of the “double religious identity,” combining segments of African matrix and spiritualistic practices with an external Catholic “facade.”

⁸What always weighed most heavily on these “relapses” were the “considerable spaces in the areas of health, education, leisure and culture” that the Catholic Church continued and continues to occupy. A very recent event was particularly disturbing in the harmonious evolution of the relations of the lay State with the religious sphere in Brazil. This is the Agreement between the Brazilian State and the Holy See signed in 2008, a document that raised much controversy. In response to this agreement, the General Law on Religions, presented in 2009, was created in order to change the content of the agreement in question, extending it to other religious denominations. According to researcher Fischmann (2009), this is an “attempt to correct an incorrigible error”.

Christian rationality Monteiro (2006, 2009); the growing increase of Evangelical Pentecostal churches and, later, neo-Pentecostal ones, throughout the second half of the twentieth century, accompanied by strong political lobbying and opposition to Catholic influence.

The religious contamination of the secular state in Brazil is not very different from that of other countries, because, in fact, there are no known concrete examples of total exemption or neutrality of the state towards different religions (Mariano 2005). What must be kept very clear is that all of this has repercussions mainly in the sense of Catholic education, passing through the challenge of “doing education” as a public service, of the necessary participation in the culture of dialogue with other religions and the renewed effort to construct its own spaces for the cultivation of the processes of Catholic identity, while at the same time contributing to the preservation of the exercise of the lay function of the State.

8.5 Recent Dialogues on Socio-Educational Inclusion Practices

Historically, Brazilian legislation empowered the institutions contemplated by the Law of Philanthropy, the destination, for social practices, of 20% of the total volume of income corresponding to the exemption from official taxes. Many institutions offered scholarships to the economically vulnerable population. This legislation underwent constant innovation. From 2012, however, the legislation was tightened up, obliging educational institutions to offer one scholarship for every five paying students.⁹ The Ministry of Education’s control over these practices was clearly tightened.

The novelty, in spite of containing a limiting factor in the autonomy of the institutions, gave the opportunity to generate an environment of sufficiently secure solutions, both for economic and financial sustainability and for the expansion of the effectiveness of the values of Catholic education and other similar entities. Since I had to deal with the discussion of philanthropic entities,¹⁰ the new environment created mobilized me a lot and I began to outline an opinion survey among the administrative, pedagogical and social assistance heads of Catholic education institutions. The question of the survey aimed to determine the educational effectiveness

⁹Federal Law No. 12.101/2009, Certification of Social Assistance Charitable Entity (CEBAS), with the issuance of Regulatory Ordinance No. 15, published on August 14, 2009 legislates on the conditions required for the Certification in guideline. Obviously, the determination of a scholarship for every five paid students is not tout-court, since the Law allows for partial scholarships and material support for scholarship holders to be calculated within the total. This applies to basic education, but it also applies to higher education under the same scheme already practiced by PROUNI, Universidad para Todos, since 2005.

¹⁰Today, CEBAS certification is in force.

according to the values of the Catholic institutions of education, of the offer of scholarships required by law within the institutions themselves or in institutions created, in more vulnerable social contexts.¹¹

It is known that, with the new movements of legislation, some institutions started to practice different modalities of offering scholarships in order to meet at the same time the legal requirements without losing the focus of their institutional values together with guaranteeing the economic and financial viability.

From a simple question about the advantages and limitations of the different modalities, some important contributions were collected, which help to make progress in the reflection.

Firstly, there is a strong convergence in the statement that “*it is not the administrative that should underpin pedagogical choices*”, since “*numbers can camouflage faces*”. Moreover, there are those who say that strictly speaking “*there are no economic-financial advantages in either of the two options*”. It must be an “*option designed as a pedagogical policy*”. There is, however, the perception that, in practice, in spite of the fact that the institutions pleaded fidelity to the mission as a central motivation, many times other arguments are implicitly considered, even linked to not causing damage to the comfort of the families who pay, preserving their presumed expectations.

The model of offering internal scholarships to the same institution that serves paid public seems not to be rejected whenever it is viable, even claiming that it would be the “*closest to the best*” model. In the opinion of some, it is one of the elements that contribute to the quality of education and to equity in education. This *would be “adding social and intellectual value*”, since “*we learn more with others, being together, than giving the opportunity for only one context to develop in isolation*”. There are those who remind us that we should avoid contributing to the “*confinement of the periphery*” and to foster the practice of exchange, since this is very important so that those who come from the periphery “*be perceived as intelligent beings and equal to all others*”. In addition, “*the coexistence of the paid public with the scholarship holders generates mutual growth and shows concretely for the community the social work that the school develops*”. There are those who oppose the “*authentic inclusion*” to the practice of the “*perverse ‘inclusion’*”.

Depriving public institutions of the presence of scholarship holders from more vulnerable social backgrounds would help to reinforce the “*lack and deficit of diversity*” that characterizes these schools in general. These “*running the risk of being institutions of ‘perfect’ students, that is, white students, (...) from the same economic class*”, when the ‘problematic’ students are “*already eliminated in the selection process*”. The “*richness of living together in diversity*” is “*an important element for integral education*”.

¹¹The research was recently initiated and is in its exploratory phase for the construction of an interdisciplinary project on educational effectiveness according to the values of Catholic educational institutions, with the modalities in guideline.

The practice of allocating resources to external institutions,¹² and not using them within the institution itself, *“in the long term, favors the administrative dimension, but pedagogically segregates society by reaffirming what the system preaches”* with respect to the reproduction of special schools for the elite and schools that form servants of those who dominate. *“There are advantages of great social impact, but there are also dangers in segregating”*. There are opinions that are radically opposed to maintaining totally free units, *“since in fact the quality is not the same”*. However, there is also an important convergence of favourable opinions, highlighting especially their social impact on local communities. *“Making opportunities possible for needy populations”*, *“giving opportunities to populations in areas of socio-economic deprivation”*, *“strengthening the local community”*, are expressions associated with the importance of an *“intense pedagogical policy”*, (...) *“inserted in the community with a socio-political and educational proposal beyond its walls, working with families more closely”*.

Some also mention the financial argument, in the sense of having the opportunity to do more with less, since the costs of keeping scholarship holders in larger institutions are much higher than the costs in a smaller school and it becomes possible to benefit a larger public. Underlying this argument is also the idea that, in order to guarantee the maintenance of the institution’s evaluation indices, a very large investment would be necessary in the students who receive scholarships, which is difficult to achieve economically and financially.

The convergence that prevails among the managers heard is that both options are important. It is recognized that the option of awarding the scholarships at the paid public institution itself is the more complex option. It would be fundamental to maintain it, as long as it is viable, not excluding, however, the option of making scholarships available in institutions with the most vulnerable popular environments. *“Both proposals to offer scholarships are legitimate and contribute to the construction of a country with more social justice, guaranteeing access to quality education that integrally forms the subject”*.

The ideal would be for the paid public institution itself to be able to have an interaction with a deprived community in the neighborhood. Geographical distancing will easily be associated with the weakening of *“social ties, aggravating the process of elitization of the institution”* of paid public.

All these issues are on the agenda of a rich debate that demands further study and that incorporates, in particular, the question of teaching practices in the classroom for groups that are diversified, whether culturally or not. This is a tremendous challenge for institutions that have fraternity at the heart of their mission, that is, inclusion and equity.

¹²There are cases where this is a historical institutional practice of the congregation.

8.6 Non-conclusive Notes

In response to the guiding question in the introduction, some challenges are identified. It is necessary to indicate that one of the challenges of Catholic education institutions, and all those that are aligned to similar purposes, is to find and prepare teachers who have the effective conditions to achieve the creation of a classroom environment sufficiently adequate to the reigning technological innovations and the challenging demands of dealing with diversity or, at least, of provoking a radical rejection of the elitist and exclusive culture.

With regard to the denominationality of the institutions, it is necessary to underline the challenge of inter-religious dialogue. It is an important theme, cultivated in many institutions. This dialogue is a great school of learning. It is only possible if those who dialogue among themselves know how to sincerely cultivate their own processes of religious identity, cultivating also the recognition of the religious identity processes of others. This call and challenge presents a double facet: (1) to provide effective conditions for a real environment of education for harmonious inter-religious relations and mutual recognition; and (2) to provide effective conditions for a real environment that enables growth in the process of Catholic identity for all who seek this orientation.

Confessionality must also be seen in relation to the lay state. A good way is to take seriously the very expression “Catholic education”: education is the noun and Catholic is the adjective. Education is not a means of proselytizing religion, but it is a public service of preparing professionals and citizens for society. Education is Catholic, not because the Catholic name is used as a trademark printed in tradition, but because this public service is illuminated by Christian principles, values and practices professed by the Catholic Church.

Last but not least, there is the great challenge of compatibility between economic-financial sustainability and effective socio-educational inclusion work. This involves the search for a solid national support organization that provides common synergy in good management and technological innovations, as well as mutual learning from best practices in the classroom, in the technological field and from pedagogical advances in dealing with diversity and with the impacts of a perversely exclusive hegemonic culture.

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