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The pedagogical and ethical legacy of a "successful" educational reform: The *Citizen School Project*

Gustavo E. Fischman[1] · **Luis Armando Gandin**[2]

Abstract The *Citizen School Project (Escola Cidadã)* was implemented from 1993 to 2004 in Porto Alegre, capital of the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul. This article presents the conception behind the *Citizen School Project,* the basic mechanisms created to implement and evaluate its strengths and weaknesses, and some of its contradictions. After contextualising the educational reforms in Brazil during the 1980s and 1990s, the authors demonstrate how the *Citizen School Project*'s emphasis on participation and democratisation was a radical departure from Brazil's traditional public education system. Next, they present the three main goals and structures of the *Citizen School Project* – democratisation of access to schools, democratisation of schools' administration, and democratisation of access to knowledge. They conclude by discussing some pedagogic, social and political dynamics which appear to be strong legacies of this pedagogical project. The authors also argue that the *Citizen School Project* has both improved the quality of education in Porto Alegre and is an important contribution to our collective thinking about the politics of "successful" educational policies.

Keywords Citizen School Project · Brazil · democratisation · educational reform

Résumé L'héritage pédagogique et éthique d'une réforme éducative « réussie » : le projet « École citoyenne » – Le projet de l'école citoyenne *(Escola Cidadã)* a été réalisé de 1993 à 2004 à Porto Alegre, capitale de l'État brésilien Rio Grande do Sul. Cet article présente la conception à la base de ce projet, les mécanismes

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fondamentaux mis en place pour le réaliser et pour évaluer ses forces et ses faiblesses, ainsi que quelques-unes de ses contradictions. Après avoir contextualisé les réformes éducatives du Brésil au cours des années 1980 et 1990, les auteurs montrent que l'accent du projet de l'école citoyenne mis sur la participation et la démocratisation a été un changement d'orientation radical par rapport au système traditionnel de l'éducation publique au Brésil. Ils décrivent ensuite les trois grands objectifs et également structures du projet : démocratisation de l'accès à l'école, démocratisation de l'administration scolaire et démocratisation de l'accès aux connaissances. Ils concluent en analysant plusieurs dynamiques pédagogiques, sociales et politiques qui se révèlent être le solide héritage de ce projet pédagogique. Les auteurs constatent par ailleurs que l'école citoyenne a amélioré la qualité de l'éducation à Porto Alegre et contribue en outre fortement à la pensée collective sur les politiques générant des stratégies éducatives « réussies ».

Resumen   El legado pedagógico y ético de una reforma educativa "éxitosa": El Proyecto Escuela Ciudadana – El Proyecto Escuela Ciudadana (*Escola Cidadã*) se llevó a cabo desde 1993 hasta 2004 en Porto Alegre, capital del estado brasileño de Río Grande do Sul. En este artículo se presenta la conceptualización del Proyecto Escuela Ciudadana, los mecanismos básicos creados para su implementación y para evaluar fortalezas y debilidades, y algunas de sus contradicciones. Después de contextualizar las reformas educativas en Brasil durante los años 1980 y 1990, los autores demuestran cómo el énfasis del Proyecto de Escuela Ciudadana en la participación y la democratización fue un cambio radical respecto del sistema de educación pública tradicional de Brasil. Luego, se presentan los tres objetivos principales y las estructuras del Proyecto Escuela Ciudadana – democratización del acceso a las escuelas, la democratización de la administración de las escuelas, y la democratización del acceso al conocimiento. Concluyen discutiendo algunas, dinámicas pedagógicas, sociales y políticas que parecen ser los legados fuertes de este proyecto pedagógico. Los autores también argumentan que el Proyecto Escuela Ciudadana mejoró la calidad de la educación en Porto Alegre y es una importante contribución a nuestro pensamiento colectivo sobre la política de las políticas educativas "exitosas".

Introduction

What are the key components of a successful educational policy? This is one of those questions which fuel never-ending debates among scholars, policy makers and the general public. Finland's educational reforms of the 1970s and 1980s constitute one rare example in which there is at least some consensus about "success" (Sahlberg 2015; Simola 2005). Yet, even in the Finnish case, the policy and research communities still question whether the Finnish educational policy reforms would work in other regions or countries (Andere 2015; Tirri 2014; Välijärvi et al. 2007). If you are concerned with this question, we would like to invite you to continue reading. But – "spoiler alert" – the policy reform presented in this article is important not because it represents a "model" of successful educational reform

which can be replicated everywhere; but because it provides conceptual and pedagogical tools to understand what was, and somehow continues to be, educational success in overcoming one-size-fits-all models in education.

Our starting point is that a key lesson from both Finland's reforms and the Brazilian *Escola Cidadã,* or *Citizen School Project,* is that there is no perfect educational model, ready to be replicated everywhere (Erickson 2014; Fischman and Tefera 2014). No effective reform in education can be implemented in spite of the people involved in it. If a "successful" project is to be tried out elsewhere, what should be done is not a replication, but a *re-invention* based on a translation, which is always a rewrite of the original, sensitive to the conditions, the actors and the meaning-making processes of the new site.

In this paper, we describe and analyse the very real transformation created and produced by the *Citizen School Project,* which was implemented in Porto Alegre, Brazil, from 1993 to 2004[1] and represented an equitable and ethical way of conceiving schooling. We present the conception behind the *Project,* the basic mechanisms created to implement and evaluate its strengths and weaknesses, and some of its contradictions. In this spirit, we begin this article with a vignette which, for us, illustrates why the *Citizen School Project* has been a successful pedagogical model. We then present a brief discussion of educational reform in Brazil during the 1980s and 1990s as a way of contextualising the radical departure of the *Citizen School Project* from Brazil's traditional public education system through its emphasis on participation and democratisation.[2] We follow this by describing the three main goals and structures of the *Citizen School Project* – democratisation of access to schools, democratisation of schools' administration, and democratisation of access to knowledge. We conclude with a discussion of the key dynamics through which the educators and citizens of Porto Alegre, where the *Citizen School Project* was located, were engaged in the complex process of building a school which was academically, socially and politically significant. We also argue that the *Citizen School Project* both improved the quality of education in Porto Alegre and was an important contribution to our collective thinking about the politics of "successful" educational policy.

Julia and João: schooling, love, hate and citizenship

Sometimes in the middle of a research project, when trying to understand something new or a complex reality, we find our senses confronted with powerful first-hand images, strong words and intense smells which not only shock us emotionally, but

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[1] The Workers' Party (leading a coalition of leftist parties) governed the city from 1989 to 2004, but it was not until the second term, which started in 1993, that the *Citizen School Project* was implemented.

[2] Our reflections are based on extensive research on the *Citizen School Project*. Luis Armando Gandin has been conducting research, through interviews with city officials, teachers, parents and students, and observations in schools, for the past 15 years. Gustavo E. Fischman has conducted fieldwork on the *Citizen School Project* over two different periods and has been analysing educational reform in Brazil since 1995. For our combined published work on the *Citizen School Project* and details about it, see: Fischman and McLaren (2000); Fischman and Gandin (2007, 2009) and Gandin (2009, 2010, 2011).

also force us to try to comprehend the complexity of participants' experiences, challenged to explain what is new in all its contradiction and uncomfortableness. The brief narrative which follows – a small fragment of a simple episode in the life of a school principal, her assistants and a child – exemplifies one of those rich moments. It struck us as ironic, full of suggestive qualities and, above all, encouraged us to think about the possibilities of developing an educational-critical discourse of hope.

I met Julia Sales (pseudonym), a school principal, several years ago[3] when doing research about the *Citizen School Project* in Porto Alegre, Brazil. I wanted to meet Julia because she was considered a controversial figure: an exemplary leader, somebody to consult on pedagogical issues, who was also a fierce critic of the ways the reform was being implemented. I was very curious to find out if there were "political pressures" or limitations placed on a principal who did not share the "official" political discourse about the *Citizen School Project*.

While it was not difficult to schedule a visit to Julia's school, getting there was not so easy. Like all the schools built by the *Citizen School Project*, the Municipal School of the West of Porto Alegre (pseudonym) required a 45-minute two-bus combination ride. This school was located in a neighbourhood in the western part of the city which had only a few months before got its first public services of water, sanitation and the beginning of a pavement plan. Situated among traditionally small and uneven mixed-materials houses of a poor and working-class neighbourhood in Porto Alegre, the Municipal School of the West is a very impressive structure designed to offer educational services to 900 students. The school has 25 classrooms, an administrative area, a large playground, a full kitchen, a multi-purpose dance/gymnasium area and a gardening space. This school was a new construction, with an inviting style, and an open and very colourful design. In a school serving that many pupils, Julia's presence commanded respect, and her voice, well-trained after 20 years as a teacher and a decade as a principal, was both respectful and imposing. After half an hour of conversation and feeling that our initial rapport was good, the interview was abruptly interrupted by screams of "Aunty, Aunty Julia" and knocks at the door of the office.[4]

Julia: What's going on? [*Sulina, the school cook, came into the office and was showing signs of discomfort*]
Sulina: It is João, again. He wants to get in.
Julia: How is he …?

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[3] This example is taken from Gustavo E. Fischman's fieldwork and, for that reason, uses the first person.

[4] In many parts of Brazil, and particularly in poor neighbourhoods, teachers are usually addressed as "Aunties". This is a very common strategy which relates to the particular gender regimes of schools in Brazil. Paulo Freire described this situation in the following way: "To accept the 'aunt' identification does not provide any positive value. It means, on the contrary, the taking away of something which is fundamental to the *teacher*: her professional responsibility… [it] is almost like saying that *female* teachers, like *good aunts*, must not fight, must not rebel, must not got on strike" (Freire 1997, p. 79, italics in the original; our translation). For a more detailed discussion of the gendered dimensions of teaching in Latin America, see Fischman (2007).

Sulina: [*interrupting the principal*]: Completely drunk and crazy as always.
Julia: Let him in, give him some food and call Sabine [*the Assistant Principal*] and if there is somebody from EJA [*the youth and adult education programme*] call her too. No, let me handle him first. I will get the food and you call them.

At that point Julia looked at me and said, "I'm sorry, if you want to wait, no problem. I'll be back."

I answered, "Oh, no problem, I will wait", thinking that Julia would be back in 15 min. How long would it take a principal to deal with a drunk student? A few minutes later Julia, her Assistant Principal, an instructor from EJA and João entered the principal's office. While leaving the office, I was quite impressed by João. He was very skinny, but tough-looking, black, 16 or 17 years old, missing all his upper front teeth, smelling of alcohol, and wearing dirty clothes. That combination and my background in schools in the United States made me think, once more, "Well, this is going to take only 15 min."

An hour passed. From the next office, I overheard a vivid exchange between João and the teachers. To sum up their conversation: João simply wanted to be back in school and the educators explained to João that he could not come to school drunk and, since he was older now, he should legally attend the adult and youth education programme and not the regular school. They also told him he was welcome to use the school and the library as often as he wanted. Finally, the principal asked him to sign a letter promising that he was going to start the EJA programme that same day. After that, they sent him to take a shower, change his clothes, and get ready to start the EJA programme. Once João and the other teachers had left, I came back to the principal's office and, in an effort to regain our initial rapport, I smiled at Julia and said:

Gustavo: You must love João to spend all this time and energy on him …
Julia: Love? I hate him. I could lie to you and tell you that I love João, that all the students are like my kids, but the truth is very different …

I remained silent for a while, trying to control my facial expression because I did not want to suggest to her that I was looking for a particular answer.

Gustavo: What is the truth, then?
Julia: The truth is that I am the principal of this school. I am a competent professional and, as you know, I disagree with the authorities, but I was elected to be the principal, I get a good salary to be responsible for the education of all the kids who come to the school and even those who were abandoned by the school system. In this job, I am the educational leader of this community. This community elected me as the head of a pedagogical group and we are trying very hard to educate all the kids. The ones whom I love and also the kids whom I hate.

While taking a bus towards downtown Porto Alegre, I could not stop thinking that Julia was the first educator who in a formal research interview said to me: "I hate a student." Perhaps Julia did not hate João. Perhaps Julia just hated the structures which produce situations as desperate as the one experienced by many students like João, but she was very clear in her expressions and I believed her words. However, for some uncanny reason, her expression of hate could not erase my smile and my thought that the *Citizen School Project* was more than a slogan. That afternoon I saw a different type of school. Perhaps for the first time, I saw what a caring, hopeful and intellectually demanding school could look like. Some time later, I wrote in my field notes:

> Julia's school is really different!
> Why?

- Because this school affirms the radical equality of all human beings.
- Because Julia, the principal of the school, has assumed her position of "leadership" acknowledging the importance of working with a team in order to be an effective leader.
- Because this school is an institution that does not blame João for dropping out, drinking or not speaking formal Portuguese.
- Because this school is an institution that does not punish João for not sharing the same cultural values as the teachers or the "model" good kids always present in textbooks and other curricular materials.
- Because this school is an institution that demands from João the effort needed to learn without ignoring his existential conditions.
- Because this school allows Julia and every member of a school located in a poor neighbourhood in Porto Alegre to look in the eyes of João, a poor toothless kid, without shame or guilt.
- Because in this school we saw the closest and more realistic example of citizenship education based on a model of democracy closest to the ideas of recentring education as a moral enterprise.

Contextualising the *Citizen School Project*

Porto Alegre is the capital of the state of Rio Grande do Sul in southern Brazil and home to almost 1.5 million people, making it the largest city in the region. From 1989 to 2004, over four election cycles, Porto Alegre was governed by a coalition of leftist parties which operated under the general leadership of the Workers' Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores* – PT). The creation of the Workers' Party in 1980 represented a radical change in Brazilian politics. In a country where the political structures exclusively favoured the patrimony of a small wealthy elite,[5] the creation of the Workers' Party was the first political party (apart from the Communist Party,

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[5] For more on the historical social structure of Brazil see Kowarick (1979) and Keck (1986).

which was illegal throughout most of its history in Brazil) created to defend and promote the interests of the Brazilian working class (Pinheiro 1989). This was an essential change of political and cultural perspective. Workers and other members of the lower classes took it upon themselves to propose new forms of governing because the elites and the dominant groups in Brazil were unwilling to do so – and the *Citizen School Project* is one such innovation.

This new way of thinking about the state and its role in society soon appeared in Porto Alegre (Schugurensky 2004, 2006). According to one of the former mayors of Porto Alegre (a nationally respected member of the Workers' Party), the purpose of Porto Alegre's "Popular Administration" (as the coalition of parties which governed the city for 16 years was called) was to "recuperate the utopian energies, to create a movement which contains, as a real social process, the origins of a new way of life, constructing a 'new moral life' (Gramsci) and a new articulation[6] between state and society […] that could lead social activity and citizenship consciousness to a new order" (Genro 1999, p. 9).[7]

This was also the goal of the educational policies of the Popular Administration: to promote real community involvement in the education of the city's children and to learn from the experiences of community organisation (Myers 2007). There is clearly a radical difference between this proposal and the discourses of what Passi Sahlberg (2015) labelled the *Global Education Reform Movement* (GERM). GERM is based on a neoliberal educational rhetoric which insists on the importance of education to solve almost all social problems, particularly to efficiently provide workers with the appropriate skills (Apple et al. 2010). For GERM proponents to solve the supposedly existent educational crisis, it is key to apply market or quasi-market mechanisms (Dumas and Anderson 2014). Individual choice and competition are the only forces which – according to the proponents of GERM – could end the historical inefficiencies of schools, currently controlled by the corporatist power of teachers' unions and the bureaucratic structure of school districts or national Departments of Education. Within GERM, categories such as "participation", "democracy", "collaboration" and "solidarity" are disconnected from the tradition and struggles for social and educational rights, for justice and equality – connected instead with categories such as "efficiency", "productivity" and "knowledge as commodity".

It should be noted, however, that the laborious GERM project is not one which can be over and done with, like marking a checkbox on your to-do list; educational reform is always a multi-pronged process (rather than a state) where "articulations" (Stuart Hall in Morley and Kua-Hsing 1996) have to be constructed, reconstructed and struggled over in relation to the historical circumstances of each specific social formation. The concept of articulation is central to reform efforts, because it helps us to understand the "work" which has to be done to disarticulate a concept

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[6] Coined by cultural theorist Stuart Hall, "articulation" is used here (and a few more times in this paper) as a concept to mean linkage or connection.

[7] All quotations attributed to a Portuguese-language source have been translated by the authors for the purposes of this paper.

historically associated with counter-hegemonic movements and rearticulate it to the hegemonic discourse.[8]

Participation as urban policy

Historically, schools in Brazil have had little curricular and organisational autonomy. In the majority of states and cities, when the *Citizen School Project* was created, there were no elections for city or state councils of education. They traditionally operated with a top-down structure and were staffed by members appointed by the executive. The curriculum was usually defined by the Secretariats of Education in the cities and states. The resources were managed in the centralised state agencies; schools usually had very little or no financial autonomy (Bonamino and Souza 2012; Oliveira 2007).

Although Brazil has achieved a very high level of access to elementary/primary schools, the indices of failures and dropouts continue to be as frightening in 2016 as they were in 1998 (Atlas Brasil 2013; Bonamino and Oliveira 2013). This reality is where the central purpose of the *Citizen School Project* began. Constructing new relations between state, schools and communities was a central goal of Porto Alegre's Popular Administration.

The *Citizen School Project* was not an isolated initiative (Azevedo 2002)[9] – it was organically linked to, and considered a major part of, the larger process of transforming the whole city[10] and reflected a radical transformation in how the state (in this case, the

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[8] It is beyond the scope of this article to engage in a critical discussion of the changes in the political economy of Brazil since the 1990s, but it is important to acknowledge that the social, economic and political context of Brazil, and in particular of the state of Rio Grande do Sul, in the 1980s and early 1990s was quite different from the present situation. The legacy of the movements against the Brazilian dictatorship and the struggles around notions of justice and democratisation generated multiple spaces for hope, and experiments in "participatory democracy" were implemented in several cities and municipalities throughout the country. The Workers' Party was quite active, and in most cases pioneered those experiments, which were quite instrumental in providing the popular support which made two Workers' Party leaders, Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva (2003–2011) and Dilma Rousseff (2012-current) presidents of Brazil. However, the social, economic and political context and the Workers' Party in 2016 look significantly different from the context and the Workers' Party of the 1990s.

[9] The government of the city of Porto Alegre was also a key supporter and host of the first three editions of the *World Social Forum* (2001–2003) and of the 2001 *World Educational Forum* in this region. Porto Alegre is the capital of Rio Grande do Sul, a state which is also the birthplace of the Movement of the Landless (*Movimento dos Sem Terra;* MST), a very significant and relevant social and pedagogical movement. For a thorough and comprehensive analysis of the pedagogical implications of the MST, see Tarlau (2013).

[10] Brazil approved a new constitution in 1988, establishing that education is "a right that belongs to everybody; the duty of the State and of families, promoted and stimulated with the cooperation of society, with a view to the full development of the individual for the exercise of citizenship and preparation for work" (Brasil 1988). Furthermore, in 1996, the federal Educational National Guidelines Law No. 9,394 (*Lei das Diretrizes e Bases da Educação;* LDB) was established (Brasil 1996). According to Ulisses Azevedo Leitão, "The LDB created mechanisms for administration, organisation and financial support for the public education system. One of the main initiatives was the implementation of the Fund for Maintenance and Development of Elementary Education (FUNDEF) in 1997, expanded into the Fund for the Development of Basic Education and Valorisation of Education Professionals (FUNDEB) in 2006, which aims to improve the distribution and use of resources inside each state for primary public education. By law, the states and municipalities have to invest at least 25 per cent of their tax and

municipal state) and civil society interacted. Perhaps the best-known of those initiatives is the participatory decision-making programme used to allocate up to one-third of the funds from the municipal budget. The initiative was called Participatory Budget (*Orçamento Participativo*; "OP"). OP was a system which allowed citizens to decide about the city's budget provision in the municipality. Regular issues discussed in the OP model included improvements at the level of a single neighbourhood or district, such as pavement, sewage, storm drains, schools, health care, childcare, housing, etc.[11]

Several studies (Abers 1998; Baiocchi 1999; Santos 1998; Schugurensky 2006, Schugurensky and Myers 2008) have concluded that OP has not only encouraged more transparency and efficiency in the allocation of public resources, it also improved the living conditions of poor communities by redirecting tax revenues to previously neglected areas. Kees Koonings (2004) estimated that perhaps "at least 100,000 individuals took part in one way or another in budget meetings; in other words, up to one third of the total 'poor' population of the city" (ibid., p. 92). He goes on to state that participatory budgeting has created a government "not [dependent] on clientelistic or corporatist ties but on … [the] efficacy of voluntary collective action … Hence the participatory budget has produced a synergy between civil associational life, government action, redistribution of basic public goods, and the exercise of formal democratic freedom and rights, both in conventional and new public domains" (ibid., p. 95). In a similar vein, political scientist Boaventura de Sousa Santos noted:

> The participatory budget promoted by the Prefeitura (government) of Porto Alegre is a form of public government that tries to break away from the authoritarian and patrimonialist tradition of public policies, resorting to the direct participation of the population in the different phases of budget preparation and implementation, with special concern for the definition of priorities for the distribution of investment resources (Santos 1998, p. 467).

The OP was at the core of the project of transforming the city of Porto Alegre and incorporating a historically excluded impoverished population into the processes of decision-making. As noted above, not only have the material conditions of the impoverished population improved, but the OP also generated an educative process which forged new social organisations and associations in neighbourhoods. This process was intimately related to and complemented the *Citizen School Project* decision-making process, because the OP constituted one of the organising structural bases for bringing about a more equitable society.[12]

Footnote 10 continued

transfers revenues in the public education system. These resources provide financial support to constitute FUNDEB/FUNDEF. Therefore, in these past few decades, the country almost universalized the access of the entire population in elementary school" (Leitão 2015, pp. 7–8).

[11] The OP also debated citywide matters such as public transportation, health and social assistance, economic development and taxation, urban development, education, culture and leisure. For discussions of the pedagogical implications of OP, see Schugurensky (2006).

[12] Evelina Dagnino notes that "Initiated in Porto Alegre, in the south of Brazil, in 1989, participatory-budget experiments exist today in around 100 other cities and are coming to be considered as models for countries such as Mexico, Uruguay, Bolivia, Argentina, Peru, and Ecuador. Because of their success, participatory budgets have recently been adopted by other parties in Brazil, some of them clearly for electoral purposes" (Dagnino 2003, p. 7).

The main goals of the *Citizen School project* can be summarised in a quote from José Clovis de Azevedo, Municipal Secretary of Education in Porto Alegre from 1997 to 2000:

> where everyone has guaranteed access, which is not limited to transmission of content; a school which is able to articulate the popular knowledge with the scientific knowledge. A school which is a public space for the construction and experience of citizenship, which goes beyond merely delivering knowledge and transforms itself into a social-cultural space, with a pedagogical policy oriented towards social transformation, where the student is the subject of the knowledge and where the pedagogy takes place in an interdisciplinary perspective, overcoming the curricular fragmentation present in schools. A school which has the necessary material resources to implement this policy, where the participation of all community can lead to the construction of an autonomous school, with a real democratic management, where all segments of the community have their participation guaranteed (Azevedo 1999, pp. 19–20).

The basic goals of the project – democratisation of access to school, democratisation of knowledge, and democratisation of governance – were themselves created collectively through a participatory structure: the Constituent Assembly (Azevedo et al. 2010). This Assembly had the goal of generating the principles which would guide the policy for the municipal schools in Porto Alegre.[13]

The *Citizen School Project* was created under the principle of not separating the determination of the goals from the creation of the mechanisms to implement these goals. Rather, it was important that the process of generating the practical goals reflected the democratic intentions of the Popular Administration, serving as an innovative mechanism able to produce transformations in the relationships between the schools and the community. The idea was to foster a government which created channels for meaningful and lasting development. The resulting collectively constructed normative goals replaced the traditionally distant relationship with government officials who were managing schools which they knew little, and perhaps cared little, about. In this sense, the *Citizen School Project*, in combination with OP, set the basis for a very radical Deweyan democratic experimentation[14] on the construction and organisation of transformative social and political movements.

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[13] The process of organisation of the Constituent Assembly took a considerable amount of time. The whole process started in March 1994, lasted 18 months, and involved thematic meetings in the schools, regional meetings, the Assembly itself, and the elaboration of the schools' internal regulation. The themes which guided the discussion were school governance, curriculum, principles for living together, and evaluation.

[14] For American philosopher and educationist John Dewey, the sense of real democracy was "a name for a life of free and enriching communion" (Dewey 1938, p. 184). The notion that democracy requires effective communication and participation is eloquently expressed in the following: "The devotion of democracy to education is a familiar fact. The superficial explanation is that a government resting upon popular suffrage cannot be successful unless those who elect and who obey their governors are educated. Since a democratic society repudiates the principle of external authority, it must find a substitute in voluntary disposition and interest; these can be created only by education. But there is a deeper

Democratisation of access to schools

Historically, Brazil has had a severe challenge in providing universal access to formal education, with an enormous number of children who did not attend school. National statistics show that this has been changing rapidly, but in 1991, when the Popular Administration was just starting, and even in 1994, when the *Citizen School Project* had only been in existence for one year, the situation was grave in terms of initial access to schooling. In 1991, almost 17 per cent of Brazilian school-aged children were not being formally educated, and by 1994 this number had only dropped to just above 13 per cent (Brasil 1994).

With this reality in mind, the primary goal of Porto Alegre's Popular Administration was to improve and guarantee access to its municipal schools, which were – and continue to be – situated in the most impoverished neighbourhoods. But granting access to all school-aged children is not as easy as it might sound. When the Workers' Party was elected in 1988, the city of Porto Alegre had only 19 K–8 schools (kindergarten to grade 8; fundamental education, as it is called in Brazil), with 14,838 students and 1,698 teachers, curriculum coordinators and educational supervisors (SMED 2000). Under the Popular Administration, the number of students enrolled in fundamental education grew at a remarkable rate, increasing by 232 per cent (SMED 2000) between 1988 and 2000. This illustrates what a profound effect the actions of the Municipal Secretariat of Education (*Secretaria Municipal de Educação*; henceforth referred to as SMED) have had in Porto Alegre and, although the comparison is not between equal circumstances, it is worth pointing out that between 1991 and 1998 the number of school-age children in the entirety of Brazil increased by only 22 per cent (INEP 2000, p. 53).

As enrolment grew, so did the number of fundamental education schools, which increased by 126 per cent under the Popular Administration government. (If we consider all the schools under the municipal government – including the schools geared towards early childhood, adolescents and young adults, and special education – the increase rate was actually 210 per cent; SMED 2000). It is important to highlight that these schools were all constructed in very impoverished areas of the city and that the majority of the new schools were actually built inside or around shantytowns or *favelas*. This means that the schools did not only bring back students who dropped out of other public schools (in most cases administered by another agency such as the educational department of the State of Rio Grande do Sul), but they also created a space for many children who never attended school and possibly would never have done so.

Nevertheless, guaranteeing initial access to school did not guarantee that these children would benefit from it. In order to concretely democratise access to schools, SMED proposed, in 1995, a new organisation for the municipal schools. Instead of keeping the traditional structure of grades with the duration of one year each (fundamental education grades 1–8), the idea was to adopt a new structure called

Footnote 14 continued

explanation. *A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience*" (Dewey 2016; quoted in Vinson et al. 2001, p. 7; italics added).

"Cycles of Formation" (*Ciclos de formação;* Krug 2001). We should make clear that the idea of reorganising the curriculum and the space–time[15] of the schools into cycles instead of grades does not originate from Porto Alegre, having been introduced in Portugal and Spain before. While what the *Citizen School Project* was implementing was not original *per se,* it was a new configuration which, according to SMED, would offer a substantially better opportunity for dealing with the need for democratisation of access and knowledge by recognising the individual needs of its children. The idea was that by using a different conception of the learning/time equation, the *Citizen School Project* would not punish students for allegedly being "slow" in their process of learning (Gomes 2004). In this new configuration, the traditional deadline – the end of each academic year – when the students had to "prove" that they had "learned" something, was eliminated in favour of a different time organisation. The establishment of the cycles was a conscious attempt to eliminate the mechanisms in schools which perpetuate exclusion, failure and dropout, as well as the blaming of the victim that accompanies these.

How did the cycles of formation actually work in the *Citizen School Project*? The schools had three cycles of three years each, a practice which added one year of early childhood education inside the schools, expanding fundamental education to nine years – which would eventually become the law in Brazil. This made the municipal schools responsible for the education of children aged 6–14 years. The three cycles were organised based on the cycles of life: each one corresponds to one phase of development, i.e., childhood, pre-adolescence and adolescence. This new structure effectively changed the educational reality in the majority of public schools which had organised students with multiple "fails" inside classrooms intended for much younger children. By having students of the same age in the same year of the cycle, SMED claimed to re-motivate those pupils who had failed several times.

In the schools using cycles, students progressed from one year to another within one cycle; thus the notion of "failing" was eliminated. Despite this victory, SMED understood that the elimination of mechanisms of exclusion was not enough to achieve the goal of democratisation of knowledge. Because of this, the *Citizen School Project* created several new mechanisms which aimed to guarantee the inclusion of students. It established Progression Groups for those students whose age did not match what they had learned. The intention behind these groups was to provide students who had experienced multiple fails in the past with a stimulating and challenging environment where they could learn at their own pace and fill the gaps in their educational development – gaps which existed because of the multiple fails they had experienced. Furthermore, for students who came from other school systems (from other city or state schools, for example) and had experienced multiple fails, the Progression Groups were also a space where they could be given closer attention so that they would ultimately be integrated into the cycles, according to their age. The premise was that schools had to change their structure to adapt to the

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[15] The introduction of the cycles meant a reorganisation of time (students' learning was evaluated more often – to guarantee that they were not left behind – and pupils were also given more time to learn) but also spatial modifications, since the architecture of the schools was modified according to pedagogical goals, for example to favour collaboration among teachers and students or to promote creative activities.

students, and not the other way around, which had historically been the case (Souza et al. 1999, pp. 24–25).

This idea of designing a new structure to better respond to students' needs led to the creation of another entity: the Learning Laboratory. This was a space where students with more serious learning problems would get individual attention, but also a place where teachers conducted research in order to improve the quality of their regular classes. For students with special needs, there were the Integration and Resources Rooms, which were "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, p. 50)

With all these mechanisms, the *Citizen School Project* not only granted initial access, but also guaranteed that the educational space occupied by disadvantaged children was a space which treated them with the dignity, respect and quality necessary to keep them in school and educate them to be citizens within Brazil's emerging democracy.

Democratisation of knowledge

Curriculum transformation was a crucial part of Porto Alegre's project to generate opportunities for building a collective sense of active citizenship, going beyond simplistic models which reduced "citizenship" to access to traditional forms of civic knowledge. There was a new epistemological understanding about what counts as knowledge as well. The *Citizen School Project* went beyond mere occasional mentioning of cultural manifestations or class, racial, sexual and gender-based oppression. It included these themes as an essential part of the always contentious and complex processes of construction of civic and political knowledges.

One of the most noticeable epistemological shifts came through the problematisation of the notions of "core" and "peripheral" types of knowledge. The starting point for the construction of curricular knowledge was the culture(s) of the communities themselves, not only in terms of content, but in terms of perspective as well. This organisation of the curriculum, in Thematic Complexes, was a way of having the whole school work on a central generative theme from which the disciplines and areas of knowledge, in an interdisciplinary effort, structured the focus of their content.

The pedagogical teams at each school were encouraged to follow 10 steps for the construction of the thematic complex and for the translation of macro discussions into the curriculum. These steps – nicknamed by some in SMED and in the schools as "the decalogue" – were the following:[16]

(1) acknowledgment and study of the context [where the school is situated] through participatory research conducted by the school collective in the community;

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[16] These steps changed slightly over time and among schools, but this description summarises the core of SMED's proposal for the schools.

(2)   reading and problematisation of the [findings of the] research; selection of the statements gathered in the research which are significant and representative of the aspirations, interests, conceptions and cultures of the community;

(3)   definition of the complex in the collective of the cycles; determination of a phenomenon which gives organisation to the most significant information and angles of the researched reality;

(4)   elaboration of the principles on the knowledge areas;

(5)   collective selection of a conceptual matrix; broadening of the conceptual matrix in the areas;

(6)   creation of a graphic representation of the complex;

(7)   elaboration of work plans in every knowledge area, cycle and years inside the cycles;

(8)   circulation of these plans among all the participants; composition of interdisciplinary strategies among and within cycles;

(9)   evaluation and periodic re-planning through systematic meetings by cycles, years in the cycle, and area; and

(10) problematisation of the lived thematic complex, aiming to find the focus of the next thematic complex (Goroditch and Souza 1999, p. 82).

The Decalogue guided a pedagogical research process – also called socio-anthropological research – performed by teachers in the communities where the schools were situated. The themes which interested and/or were a concern for the local community were gathered. After this process of gathering the statements of the members of the community, the most significant statements were selected by the collective of teachers participating in discussions specifically allocated for this and formed the basis of the construction of the thematic complex. This thematic complex provided the whole school with a central focus which guided the curriculum of that school for a period of time which varied from a semester to an entire academic year.

After having determined the principles, the larger contribution of each knowledge area for the discussion of the thematic complex, and the conceptual matrix – a web of concepts from the knowledge area, rather than isolated facts or information which the teachers understand are essential to use when dealing with the thematic complex – the teachers would have meetings organised by their knowledge areas and by each year in the cycles, to elaborate and plan the curriculum. Teachers had to "study" their own knowledge areas and select the concepts which would help to problematise the thematic complex. They also had to work collectively with teachers of other areas in order to assemble a curriculum which was integrated and dense enough to address the issues listed in the thematic complex.

In the context of the *Citizen School Project*, "the thematic complex brings about the perception and comprehension of the reality and makes explicit the world view which the people involved in the process have" (Silvio Rocha as cited in SMED 1999a, p. 21). Because the thematic complex is closely related to social problems,

the process forced teachers 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 were also forced to think about the relation between "official knowledge" (Apple 2014) and this common sense. Therefore, this approach dealt simultaneously with three problems of traditional education: the fragmentation of knowledge, the "apparent" neutrality of school content, and the absolute supremacy which traditional schools grant to scientific/ erudite knowledge over local knowledge of the communities, especially very impoverished ones – as is the case in Porto Alegre.

The *Citizen School Project* conceived the organisation 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. The traditional rigid curricular structure organised in traditional disciplines (language, maths, physics, etc.) was broken and general interdisciplinary areas were created. These general areas of study were labelled: Social Expression; Biological, Chemical and Physical Sciences; Social History; and Mathematics and Logic.

The real transformation which occurred in the curriculum of the schools in Porto Alegre was that students were no longer studying mathematics, history, or social and cultural studies through books which never addressed the real problems and interests they had. By organising learning into these thematic complexes, the students acquired knowledge about history by beginning with the historical experience of their families. They studied important social and cultural content by focusing on and valorising their own cultural manifestations. It is important to note that these students were still learning about the history of Brazil and the world, including the so-called "high" culture, but these were seen through different lenses. Their culture would not be forgotten in order for them to learn about "high status" culture. Rather, by understanding their own situation, their culture and its value, these students were able to simultaneously learn and have the chance to transform their historical marginalisation. By studying the problems (rural exodus, living in illegal lots, etc.) as well as the strengths of self-organisation (in neighbourhood associations and in cultural activities and groups), and connecting these issues to school knowledge such as geographical notions of space, historical events, mathematical competence and many more, the *Citizen School Project* helped to construct real knowledge and alternatives for the communities living in terrible conditions.

This shift of what was considered the core or the centre of knowledge affected not only the pedagogical conception which guided the daily life in the classrooms; it also transformed how the school itself functioned as a whole. This conception of knowledge was now spreading throughout the entire school system. The project not only served the "excluded" by generating a different formal education for students, but also served them by creating an innovative structure which made it possible for the community of those who have historically been excluded to regain their dignity (both in material and in symbolic terms).

Democratisation of governance

The first mechanism which guaranteed the democratisation of governance was the Constituent Assembly. It not only provided a space to decide on the implementation of the project, but also allowed for real participation on the definition of the goals of the *Citizen School Project*.

Among the mechanisms created to democratise the governance of the educational system in Porto Alegre, the School Council was a central element. These councils, which were established by a municipal law in December of 1992 and implemented in 1993, were designed to promote the democratisation of the decision-making process and governance 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 became the most important institutions in the schools. They were, and continue to be, formed by elected teachers, school staff, parents, students, and by one member of the administration, and they have consultative, deliberative and monitoring functions. Together, its members deliberated about the global projects for the school, the basic principles of administration, how to allocate economic resources, and how to monitor the implementation of the decisions.[17]

In terms of resources, it should be noted that before the Popular Administration took office, there was a practice (common in Brazil) of a centralised budget. Every expense (even the daily ones) had to be approved by the central administration, and then either 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 had "their hands tied" with no autonomy at all. SMED changed this structure and established a new policy to make a previously determined amount of money available to each school every three months. According to SMED, this policy change gave schools the financial autonomy to manage their expenditures according to the goals and priorities established by the school council. At the same time, it also gave parents, students, teachers and staff on the school council a notion of social responsibility in administering public money and it taught them to hierarchise the investments with solidarity in mind (SMED 1999b).

The school council also had the power to monitor the implementation, through the principal and her/his team, of its decisions (SMED 1993, p. 3). In fact, the school council was an empowered structure in the schools. It was the main governance mechanism inside the schools, and its limitations were only the legislation and the policy for education collectively constructed in democratic fora. Decisions about the curriculum were part of the deliberation, and the inclusion of parents, students and staff (or even teachers, if we consider the traditional school) in this process was a great innovation of the model.

Along with the school council, another structure was put in place to guarantee democratic spaces in the *Citizen School Project*: in the municipal schools of Porto

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[17] The school council reserves 50 per cent of seats for teachers and staff and 50 per cent for parents and students. One seat is guaranteed to a member of the administration of the school, usually the principal, who is elected (her/himself) by all members of the school. The principal and her/his team are responsible for the implementation of the policies defined by the school council.

Alegre, the whole school community (including students aged 12+) elects the principal by direct vote. The one responsible for the implementation of the decisions of the school council (i.e., the principal) is her/himself elected defending a particular project of administration for the school. There is a legitimacy which 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 have a great degree of embeddedness and, because of this, SMED felt that it was possible to avoid the potential problem of having someone responsible for the concretisation of the school council's deliberations who was not connected with the project. But the responsibility of the community does not stop there: through the school council, the school community has a way of monitoring the activities of the principal and holding her/him responsible for implementing its democratic decisions. One example where this control is exercised is in the pressure which parents put on the schools to make sure their children are not given a watered-down version of the curriculum. This direct election of the one responsible for implementing the directives created by the school council, and also elected directly by the school community, represents a mechanism which aims to generate the principle of democratic management at the local level of the school.

Evaluating the success of the *Citizen School Project*'s educational structures

The democratisation of access is certainly an important aspect of the *Citizen School Project* and SMED was able to advance substantially in this area. SMED knew that it would have to attack the problem of dropout if it really wanted to democratise access to schools. SMED recognised that the dropout problem was not accidental, but something structural in the society, as pointed out by Michael Apple (1996, p. 90). By drastically reducing the number of students who abandoned school and therefore dramatically increasing their chances of having better opportunities, the *Citizen School Project* attacked a central problem. The students who stayed in school were able to experience the alternative educational programme designed by the *Citizen School Project*, and would be able to learn about and, hopefully, fight against the circumstances which led so many of them to drop out of school in the first place. The data speak for themselves: the dropout rate fell from more than 9 per cent in 1989 to around 1 per cent in 2003 (SMED 2003) and has remained at this level (SMED 2015).

Together with the thematic cycles, another practice which has served to radically reduce dropout is the close monitoring of student attendance. By employing an aggressive policy of visiting the homes of the parents of students who failed to show up at school after a number of days and explaining to them how harmful it was to their children not to attend school, the *Citizen School Project* was able to reduce the dropout rate significantly. Involving the whole community and the neighbourhood associations in this monitoring has been another successful strategy. In fact, the

drastic reduction of dropout also appears to be related to the involvement of the communities with the school.

The "care" which the communities dedicate to the schools is readily apparent as well. While state schools are constantly damaged, robbed and vandalised, the municipal schools are almost never targeted in this manner. These schools do not have any significant problems, and even the older ones are in very good shape. This is not something to be taken for granted as 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.

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 *Citizen School Project* clearly attained its goal of democratising access to school. In doing so, the *Citizen School Project* made possible a level of access to public benefits which is not usually available to public school students in Brazil, as evidenced by the tripling of enrolment between 1989 and 2000 (SMED 2000).

In order to evaluate the degree to which the project has succeeded in democratising knowledge, several elements must be examined. One of these elements is the organisation of the school in cycles of formation rather than traditional grades (Franco 2001; Krug 2001). As we described above, there is a political conception of knowledge and learning behind the choice of radically changing the organisation of the schools. SMED has been investing heavily in teacher education and teacher salaries in order to make sure the priority of education in its schools is the learning process of the students. The elimination of repetition is only one of many measures which are, together, integrated into a whole new conception of schooling which involves a deep discussion of what is valued as knowledge and what is *real* democratisation. Therefore, the lack of repetition does not mean the lack of evaluation and monitoring of the learning process of the students.

There is, nevertheless, another mechanism created by SMED which is directly connected with the democratisation of knowledge: the thematic complex. The thematic complex is a methodological technique constructed in order to deal with a serious challenge. The problem the *Citizen School Project* creators were faced with was how to simultaneously value and work with the knowledge and culture of the community while also making the accumulated body of human knowledge available and accessible to the students. The question did not exactly end there, because the *Citizen School Project* also wanted to help students (and teachers) construct new knowledge through the process of dialogue between and problematisation of local and official knowledge. For the *Citizen School Project*, only knowledge which is emancipatory – that is, which helps students to establish relations between phenomena, between their own lives and the larger social context – is knowledge worth pursuing in schools.

Nevertheless, the *Citizen School Project* did not claim that the schools should abandon traditional school knowledge. The creators of the *Citizen School Project* knew that this knowledge is absolutely necessary for the advancement of the students in the school system. They also insisted that students who attended the

municipal schools should not be denied the so-called "accumulated knowledge of humankind". There are several educational programmes for poor students which end up offering them a "poor" education, claiming that they will not need better education because they will end up in jobs which only require basic skills anyway (Paiva and Burgos 2009). This is something the *Citizen School Project* strongly fought against in its programmes with teachers. It was necessary to break with the dominant cultural models which maintain that students who live in *favelas* have deficits because they are poor (Paes da Silva and Vasconcelos 1997).

While insisting that students from the *favelas* should have access to the same quality of education which wealthier students have in Brazil (and, as described above, the material conditions which the schools offer for these students are in fact similar to the ones which many students have in private schools), the *Citizen School Project* also problematised the notion of what knowledge "counts", using the principle that any knowledge used in schools should always be submitted to criticism.

This position fostered a real dialogue between the knowledge of the communities and traditional school knowledge; this position is what generated the space for Julia to respond to João in an effective way, opening a dialogue which did not exclusively reduce a poor toothless kid to the subject of Julia's charity but made him a participant in the transformation of his life and the lives of others through a dialogue designed to overcome the limitations of a complex situation.

In our analysis, the epistemological rupture which played such a major role in the *Citizen School Project* is a sign that the project was successful in the construction of a real pedagogical alternative to GERM. Instead of creating isolated "diversity" programmes without attempting to change the context of a largely outdated and discriminatory educational structure, the *Citizen School Project* created opportunities to develop structures and invite popular participation, Thus, the encounter of diverse cultures, tastes, orientations and capacities had space to flourish. The *Citizen School Project* expanded the spaces where diverse practices were organically integrated, contrary to the long-term tradition of most schools in the region. In order for educators, and the communities which they served, to avoid falling into old diversity-rejecting habits and construct a powerful and democratic set of inclusive experiences, the whole institutional structure had to be changed.

In terms of the democratisation of governance, the Constituent Assembly is a core element. The major policy directives formulated by SMED derive from this Assembly. This marks a significant departure from the traditional model, in which decisions are handed down from above while implementation is left to the schools. Through their elected delegates, schools and their communities were actively involved in the construction of the major educational policies in Porto Alegre.[18] As we have shown above, the *Citizen School Project* truly was a project for historically excluded populations. Not only students, however, benefitted from the experience.

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[18] This is a unique aspect of the *Citizen School Project*. Archon Fung, who studied Local School Councils in Chicago and classified them as highly positive, nevertheless suggested that "centralized interventions, themselves formulated through deliberation, would then further enhance the deliberative, participatory, and empowered character of otherwise isolated local actions" (Fung 1999, p. 26). This combination, deemed ideal by Fung, is exactly what was achieved in Porto Alegre.

Parents, students and school staff – usually mere spectators of the reform processes in the Brazilian educational system – became part of the structure of governance inside the school council and were able to bring their knowledge "to the table". In fact, the whole process challenged the cultural model which claimed that poor and "uneducated" people should not participate because they did not know how to do so.

The processes of democratisation associated with the *Citizen School Project* also had many elements which were resisted and criticised. While the opening of spaces for the inclusion of students and parents' voices and needs, and incorporating a relational approach to what counts as knowledge were usually celebrated as central components of the participatory reform, making school councils a real empowered locale was a very difficult process (Gandin 2009). In Porto Alegre, as in most schools worldwide, at the level of the local institution, teachers and school administrators tended to have the final word and only in a few cases were there significant and sustainable processes of students' and parents' participation rather than a mere rubber stamping of decisions taken by teachers. It remains a challenge to empower students and parents' voices in the school councils (Castro 2011).

The implementation of the pedagogical cycles was another component which was controversial and criticised by some (Paro 2000, 2001; Fetzner 2009). For those who opposed them, the cycles were perceived as a strategy which generated better educational results for the city but did not guarantee real student learning.[19] The *Citizen School Project*, having introduced the criterion of no failure, emphasised the need for more diagnostic assessment practices in order to guarantee learning. As expected, not all schools were successful in implementing these practices, and the ideal of eliminating school failure could have represented a watered-down educational experience for some students (Fetzner 2009; Mainardes 2006).

The largest barrier, though, has been the lack of local institutional support for the project. Since 2005, a new political coalition (a centre, centre-right alliance of parties) has been governing Porto Alegre. This coalition was elected (after four Popular Administration terms) in part because it promised not to touch the legacy – including the transformations in the educational municipal system – of the previous government. Despite this promise, research (Santos and Gandin 2013; Gandin 2011) has been showing that the governments after 2005 started by not properly supporting the mechanisms put in place during the *Citizen School Project* and ended up, in the last term, pushing towards systemic changes. In the first term, we had a vacuum in terms of policy (Santos and Gandin 2013), which created an empty space in which schools were left to themselves, with no guidance or proposal, to determine their own curriculum and organisation. The following administrations took a more intrusive approach, promoting the idea of a centralised curriculum, an initiative which did not go through due to the resistance in schools.

In short, the support of the local state government, which had been behind the initial thrust of the *Citizen School Project* and provided the framework for the proposal to flourish over the past decade, is no longer there. The lack of institutional

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[19] We should point out that there are different models of pedagogical cycles and our comments are restricted to the model implemented in Porto Alegre. For an analysis of models of pedagogical cycles see the work of Elba Barreto and Sandra Sousa (2004); Barreto and Eleny Mitrulis (1999) and Jefferson Mainardes (2006).

support has been costing the schools dearly in terms of the sustainability of the original education reforms. We have seen a relaxation of the policy of combined close monitoring assessment and no-failure for students, coupled with a sharp increase in the fail rates from close to zero in the late 1990s to 15 per cent in 2012 (see SMED 2015). In addition, an initial lack of support for a decentralised curriculum, constructed by the school communities, with active participation of these communities and support from the educational administration, has been replaced by attempts, on the part of the current administration, to create a centralised curriculum.

If it is true that the principles of, and the incentive behind, the *Citizen School Project* are long gone from Porto Alegre's municipal administration of education, it is also true that many schools resist and continue to implement the reforms which guided the *Citizen School Project* experience – mainly its commitment for taking communities' knowledge into account. Schools in Porto Alegre learned that they were not only responsible for teaching students and communities, but they were also responsible for learning how to do it *with* them. That was a real transformation, one worth paying attention to.

Concluding reflections

From its inception in 1993, the *Citizen School Project* has been considered an educational utopia because it was organised around three main principles: (1) schooling is relevant and meaningful if it provides opportunities for learning to read the word and the world (Freire 1997); (2) learning to read the word and the world is only possible when the educational community in general and educators in particular recognise the interdependence of the political dimensions of schooling and the pedagogical dimensions of political participation; and (3) democratising schools requires individual and collective efforts to create diverse educational projects which are open and flexible in their structures while maintaining their goals of radically democratising school practices.

These three principles were linked through processes and practices which became organic to the life of some schools in the city, even after many years without a formal *Citizen School Project* in place. Perhaps one of the best examples could be found in Porto Alegrense (pseudonym), one of the largest schools in the municipal system, with 1,800 students, and one of the last to implement the *Citizen School Project* proposals – a school which one of us has been following closely. This school, which had historically been an institution without a clear and collectively constructed plan has started the process of writing, in a series of teachers' meetings, a new project for itself. In these meetings, teachers voted to reinstate socio-anthropological research in the community as the basis for the construction of the curriculum and then organised this curriculum around Paulo Freire's generative themes (a very similar concept to the initial thematic complex concept of structuring the curriculum in municipal schools).

This is a school which, when the original proposals were implemented, resisted the implementation of the cycles of formation and fought to maintain an intact

traditionally silo-like curricular mode. The fact that this particular school is now, in 2016, having all teachers visit the communities and build a curriculum which is locally relevant, tells us all that there are, indeed, changes which became organic to the city of Porto Alegre, and can re-emerge, given the right circumstances (in this particular case, a curriculum coordinator who researched the *Citizen School Project* and who has been able to engage the interest of her fellow teachers in the impact these proposals had and can have in life of the students). This development also suggests that this concept of a school which discusses what counts as knowledge, which involves the community, which has participation as a guiding principle for achieving accountability and quality in teaching and learning, is still alive. The fact that the new city administration has not backed these initiatives does not stop schools from implementing them. In fact, this is evidence that although the support of the local state was crucial for the proposal to come to life, it is possible, albeit difficult, to live it without this support.[20]

During the implementation of the *Citizen School Project* of Porto Alegre we encountered teachers with a renewed hope in the possibility of constructing a radically different school from the one they attended. We witnessed teachers actively creating a curriculum for their school through interacting with the community and meeting regularly at times especially allocated and institutionally guaranteed for dialogue about their methodology and their goals with the specific conglomerate of concepts they are developing with their students. Rather than being pressured for a kind of accountability which only looks at test results, these teachers are socially, politically and culturally responsible for providing quality education for their students. Quality in this context is not reduced to accumulation of information, or even ability to establish connections among concepts; it is also linked to the schools' capacity to generate a culturally embedded curriculum which engages students in creative thinking and, to a certain extent, in actions which could lead to social transformation in the future.

While GERM's worldwide emphasis is on testing, economic accountability and blaming the victims, developments in Porto Alegre showed that it is possible to create an alternative space, where links can be forged and where new common sense around education can be created. The *Citizen School Project* was a limited but nonetheless real alternative to the quasi-market-based solutions for management and monitoring of the quality of public schools in Brazil.

Involvement of the parents and of the students in important decisions and active monitoring in the school (not merely peripheral decisions) gave them a real sense of what "public" means in public school. At the same time, because SMED was able to involve teachers actively in the transformations – as well as helping to improve

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[20] The fact that the *Citizen School Project*, aiming to resist a centralised curriculum and standardised testing, both of which were being promoted at the national level when the project was being implemented in the late 1990s, has to be contrasted with the current context of Brazil, in which the federal government (of the same political party which governed Porto Alegre 1989–2004) is pushing for exactly these centralised policies. This begs the important question: would a proposal based on participatory and decentralised democracy have the same chance now? For an analysis of assessment policies implemented in Brazil, see Bonamino and Oliveira (2013) and Leitão (2015). We want to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for drawing our attention to the relevance of acknowledging the contextual changes.

their qualifications and their salaries – instead of merely blaming them and their unions for the problems in education (common practice in neoliberally driven reforms), the Popular Administration was able to include every segment of the schools in the collective project of constructing a quality education in the impoverished neighbourhoods where the municipal schools are situated. Thus, instead of opting for a doctrine which merely treated parents as consumers of education (treating learning in schools as a commodity), the *Citizen School* became an alternative which challenged this idea. Parents, students, teachers, staff and administrators became responsible for working collectively, each contributing their knowledge and expertise, to create better education. In this way, the *Citizen School Project* has defined itself as a concrete and effective alternative to the market logic which offers only competition and "exit" as solutions.

Julia and João's story continues to resonate inside Porte Alegre's schools. More and more students like João, who historically would not have had a chance of being inside schools, are now coming to well-constructed, well-equipped and very diverse schools. More and more principals and more and more teachers, like Julia, realise that their commitment lies in the ethical principle of educating all, while learning how to do it *with* the students and their communities and not in spite of them.

In our assessment, the most distinguishing feature of the *Citizen School Project* was the simultaneous focus on both the symbolic and pragmatic links between equity-oriented education and democratisation of societies (Fischman and Haas 2014). Those who led and were involved in this pedagogical and political experiment worked very hard in trying to make the deceptively simple idea of re-centring education as a moral enterprise a reality.[21] For many, such re-centring may seem just an expression of good will, one more slogan, a soft declaration of principles, but our two-decade-long involvement with Porto Alegre's education reform effort has convinced us that the *Citizen School Project* was, and still is, quite unique.

The link between schooling and democratisation is always an elusive one. No matter how good your ideas about schools, how detailed your description of the perfect school, when all the goals and discourses are in place, that ideal model will still fail to be ideally democratic. Nevertheless, we wish that all schools will be as imperfectly democratic as the ones we visited in Porto Alegre, that all educators will be as honest as Julia, and that all students will be treated as de-facto equal citizens like João.

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[21] We follow French philosopher Jacques Rancière in understanding "democracy" not just as set of moral procedures, political rules and forms of government, "but as a political act of subjectification, as a challenge to the distribution of the sensible, to the ways in which the world is perceived, thought and acted upon" (Friedrich et al. 2010, p. 572).

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