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Polish quasi-schools – the ideological background of parental educational initiatives*

Polskie quasi-szkoły – ideologiczne tło rodzicielskich inicjatyw edukacyjnych

STRESZCZENIE: Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie i dyskusja wstępnych wyników badań jakościowych przeprowadzonych w roku 2014 wśród rodziców organizujących i rozwijających nowe, alternatywne do szkół systemowych**, środowiska edukacyjne tzw. quasi-szkoły (Uryga, Wiatr 2015). Analiza wypowiedzi pochodzących z pogłębionych wywiadów z nicią przewodnią prowadzonych z rodzicami dzieci w wieku szkolnym – którzy w ponadprzeciętny sposób angażują się w poszukiwanie i tworzenie środowisk edukacyjnych dla swoich dzieci, dostarczają materiału skłaniającego do pytań o znaczenie tych działań oraz o ich podłoże – o szerszy kontekst społeczno-kulturowy tych inicjatyw. Zjawisko jest badane na dwóch poziomach. Jeden odpowiada na pytanie – co tu się dzieje?, drugi zaś na pytanie, jak to jest możliwe, że dzieje się to co się dzieje? Tak sformułowane pytania prowadzą analizy w dwóch kierunkach – jedna ukazuje działania rodziców w perspektywie ich krytycyzmu wobec zastanej, acz niedoskonałej rzeczywistości, druga zaś wprowadza

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** Chciałabym wyrazić wdzięczność p. prof. Barbarze Smolińskiej-Theiss (APS) oraz moim koleżankom i badaczkom – dr hab. Danucie Urydze (APS) i dr Magdzie Kulecie-Hulboj (UW) za cenne uwagi i dyskusje, które pozwoliły uczynić ten artykuł lepszym. Szkoła systemowa jest tu rozumiana jako środowisko edukacyjne zorganizowane ściśle w ramach polskiego systemu oświaty i jako takie posiadające formalny status szkoły, prowadzonej przez jednostki samorządowe lub pozasamorządowe, zarówno w formie odpłatnej, jak i nieodpłatnej. Sposób jego organizacji, prowadzenia i kontroli jest określone w Ustawie o systemie oświaty oraz w dokumentach wykonawczych do tej ustawy.

krytycyzm wobec krytycznej perspektywy rodziców i pozwala szukać głębiej ukrytych wzorów ich praktyk. Postawa krytyczna i koncepcja ideologii w wydaniu Karla Mannheima i Luisa Althussera stanowią wspólną ramę interpretacyjną obu zarysowanych perspektyw. Pozwalają one rozumieć działania rodziców z jednej strony w kategoriach sprawczości, aktywności i upodmiotowienia wobec zastanych struktur oraz w kategoriach wezwania przez neoliberalną ideologię (Althusserowskiej interpelacji) z drugiej strony. Artykuł zamykają pytania o znaczenie quasi-szkół dla szkolnictwa w Polsce, rozpięte między potencjalną zmianą i rozwojem polskiej szkoły systemowej a potencjalnym jej demontażem.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: edukacja alternatywna, quasi-szkoły, rodzicielstwo, utopia, ideologia, neoliberalizm, kultura indywidualizmu, nowa klasa średnia, postawa krytyczna, interpelacja ideologiczna, Althusser, Mannheim.

ABSTRACT: The purpose of this article is to present and discuss the preliminary results of the qualitative research conducted in 2014 among parents who organize and develop new, alternative to “system schools”¹ – educational environments of so called quasi-schools (Uryga and Wiatr, 2015). The analysis of in-depth interviews conducted with parents of school-aged children – who are extraordinarily involved in seeking and creating educational environments for them, inspire questions about the importance of these activities and their background – their broader socio-cultural context. The phenomenon is examined on two levels. The first is the level of “what is going on here?”, and the second is the level of “what makes this phenomenon happen?” These questions are analyzed in terms of two directions – one shows the parents’ actions in the perspective of their criticism of the existing but imperfect reality, and the other introduces the criticism of the parents’ critical perspective and allows to seek deeper hidden patterns of their practices. The critical attitude and ideology concept, as understood by Karl Mannheim and Luis Althusser, provides a common interpretive framework for both perspectives. On the one hand they allow to understand the activities of parents, in terms of agency, activity and empowerment, against existing structures, and on the other hand in terms of being called/ summoned by neo-liberal ideology (Althusser’s interpellation). The article concludes with questions discussing the importance of quasi-schools in current education in Poland which then opens the field between potential change and development of the incumbent public educational system and its potential dismantling.

KEYWORDS: alternative education, quasi-schools, parenthood, utopia, ideology, neoliberalism, individualism, new middle-class, critical attitude, ideological interpellation, Althusser, Mannheim.

Social and research project

In the beginning of 2013 there were media reports about the meetings of a parents’ initiative group whose aim was to create an educational institution for children other than a school. An institution where children would learn differently – in the view of their parents, better than in a “system school”. Those several meetings resulted in the creation of the first four institutions

¹ A “system school” is understood here as an educational environment organized strictly within the framework of the Polish educational system and as such having a formal status of a school, run by local authority or by non-governmental units, both in paid and unpaid form. The manner of its organization, management and control is specified in the Educational Law and in the executive documents for this Law.

(three in Warsaw and one in Poznań), which were described as “free”, “responsible” schools. One of them called itself an un-schooling group. Seeking to define a common collective category for these formations I have coined the term “quasi-school” (Uryga and Wiatr 2015). These institutions, apart from general educational intentions – teaching, raising, supporting a child development, which are the basic common goals they share with “system schools”, clearly differ from the latter organizationally, ideologically, formally and in terms of the curriculum. They do not have the formal status of a school and are thus located on the margin of the school system. From this position, the creators of quasi-schools can pursue goals independently from the law and the educational administration² and organize their activities autonomously from the educational supervision institutions. Literally and figuratively, they “reinvent” educational environments. To execute their projects, they leverage laws on home schooling³, and arrange education and support for children in more or less regular groups that have permanent meeting places.

The significance of the process which lead to creation of the first quasi-schools in 2013, lies not only in the fact that a group of children learn in an educational environment that is different from a “system school”, allowing their parents to stay really involved in its creation, but most importantly in the fact that the path has been cleared. This path, bypassing the difficult, in the perception of parents, formal requirements of conducting a pedagogical experiment⁴, paves the way to such initiatives for a wider public. From that point, the movement of establishing quasi-schools spreads throughout the country. Currently, there are several dozens of them in Poland (and about 11,000 children are educated in home schooling system in the year 2016/2017)⁵.

It is therefore worth it to ask the basic questions: in what categories can parents’ actions be interpreted and what do these actions tell us about the socio-cultural (symbolic) order that is their foundation? In other words, one can ask: *What is happening here?* and *What makes this phenomenon happen?*

² The exceptions are the opinions of psychological and pedagogical counseling centres permitting this type of education and classification examinations taken by children who learn outside of school.

³ Guaranteed by the Law of 7 September 1991 on the Education System, the right to education of a child outside school, in conditions organized by the child’s parents.

⁴ Regulation of the Minister of National Education and Sport of 9 April 2002 on the conditions for conducting innovative and experimental activities by public schools and institutions. (Journal of Laws No. 56/2002, item 506)

⁵ <https://men.gov.pl/ministerstwo/informacje/realizacja-obowiazku-szkolnego-pozza-szkolnictwem-edukacja-domowa.html>

Thus posed, the problem anchors the work in the theoretical horizons of the constructivist perspective and poststructuralism. The former interprets social phenomena as being constantly constructed in the interaction between motivated individuals and groups negotiating their social meanings (in this case: parents, teachers, and children), whereas the latter situates socially produced phenomenon in a certain frame – an obvious, mutual and undisputed material and a symbolic area that constitutes a repertoire of concepts, rationalization, argumentation, valuation, thought patterns, patterns of behavior and social practices. The two basic questions, rooted in two perspectives, or determine the layout of this article. Both the interpretation framework of the study and its results are presented in sequence, maintaining the two perspectives of investigation.

The research project is the result of my involvement in the movement of parents who seek alternative educational environments, and my own participation in the first initiative group in 2012 in Warsaw, aiming to set up a quasi-school on its own terms.

What drew my attention during the meetings, were the total devotion to the “cause”, the absolute readiness to act, the negative emotions associated with the offer of the “system school” and a simultaneous sense of inability to change it. During the discussion, many individual competences of parents were revealed – including managerial, design, legal, financial, organizational, administrative, language, culinary and psychological skills. The process of their “networking” into an organizational potential was also clear. My observations and experiences gained during the work and meetings of this active and self-propelled community have become the starting point for the following research question: what happens in the space of a family and a school that triggers and directs parents’ activity and commitment to the independent, off-system organization of education for their child. While developing my own concept of parental reflexivity and family learning, I began researching the area in which I myself remained active as a parent. I also realized the status of an insider carries both research benefits and threats. It requires a lot of research vigilance and generates a number of ethical issues. The size of the article, however, does not allow to elaborate on this matter.

I conducted the research in 2014 in one of the major Polish cities⁶. I used the grounded theory methodology (Charmaz 2013) supported by the

⁶ Funds for conducting research were awarded as part of the grant competition of the Maria Grzegorzewska University (BST9-13)

discourse analysis within the framework of the sociology of knowledge (Keller 2011). Guided by the principle to gather the largest possible diversity of voices and stories, I searched for a specific research group to conduct an in-depth extended analyzes (Patton 1990, p. 169). After determining the criteria for selecting the participants of my study – their critical characteristics (deliberate categorical selection and critical selection) (Patton 1990, pp. 169–174), I used snowball sampling as a supportive method.

Included in the group of subjects were eleven people of both sexes, different ages and with varying degrees of involvement in alternative educational environments (initiators of quasi-schools, quasi-school leaders, persons interested in quasi-schools, skeptics, participants and former participants in quasi-schools or initiative groups). The subjects spent their childhood and youth in the communist Poland. They were well-educated people (10 people had higher education and one person had secondary education), interested in self-development, curious about the world and trying to shape their own reality. Many of them had experience in working for non-governmental organizations. The nature of their professional work in industries such as media, advertising, law, finance, science, consulting, or art, gave them the freedom to create representations of the world as well as taught them how to identify different necessities and possibilities. Together, they can be described as urban middle class (see “new middle class” in Jacyno, 2007, p. 28).

The data for this study has been obtained through in-depth interviews with a guided interview thread. All interviews had been recorded and then transcribed verbatim (Poland 2001).

I have subjected the material to a multi-stage analysis which took place in subsequent iterations of reading the interview transcripts. I used both techniques from the arsenal of the grounded theory methodology as well as those used in the tradition of discourse analysis. At the level of grounded theory analysis, I focused primarily on the activities and experiences of parents, the ongoing processes and the activity patterns. I was looking for answers to the question: *What is happening here?* I built code trees from the bottom up, starting with initial codes, close to raw data, through focused codes – combining different codes into wider categories with a higher level of conceptualization, to axial codes around which the selective codes would “wrap”, explaining the phenomenon in a multidimensional way. At the level of discourse analysis, I paid attention to the language used by parents, to the discursive creation of themselves, others and the surrounding world. Therefore, the question, around which this level of inquiry was organized, was: *What are the ideological (discursive and non-discursive) conditions of what is happening here?*

By introducing and developing the analytical codes and categories, I tried to approach the study without the assumption of one “correct” theory, wanting to maintain the maximum theoretical openness towards the data (Charmaz 2013). In the course of comparing and referencing the codes, I set and tested a working hypothesis that, in subsequent stages, allowed to carry out the process of analysis from raw data to the seeds of a theory.

One of the hypotheses introduced at the level of selective coding, referencing three selective codes clearly distinguished by saturation: *the vision of school and education*, *the vision of a child and childhood* and *the vision of a parent and parenthood*, was the concept of ideology and the critical attitude. They also ultimately formed the interpretation presented in this text.

Critical attitude and ideology – in search of an interpretive framework

In the course of the analysis, I was looking for an interpretation framework that would encompass the phenomenon in the perspective of social constructionism and post-structuralism, while allowing for a discussion of themes and practical consequences of the findings at each level.

This framework was formed by a reference to ideology. Ideology is treated here as an indispensable phantasm of reality (Žižek 2001, p. 157) that introduces such a perception of the world and processes occurring in it – that despite the contradictions and discontinuities experienced by an individual, the world appears to be ordered, understandable, coherent and logical. This is a world that is obvious and, as such – cannot be challenged. It eludes critical questions that undermine its obviousness.

The use of the ideology concept in the study allows for the introduction of a common denominator in the analysis which is carried out on two levels. It is a critical attitude that, while being capable of questioning the existing reality, one can reach the layers of latent senses that organize themselves into phantasms of reality. I understand the criticism as being capable of insight into one’s own consciousness that reveals the illusory nature of understanding one’s social situation (Rasiński 2012, p. 96) and has the power to discover the elements of phantasm. The ideology and the critical attitude towards it allow one to ask about both the reality the acting parents are critical of, and the ideology of their own actions. The first question constitutes an elaboration of the main problem: *What is happening?* The second one specifies the question *What makes this phenomenon happen?*

The scope of this article does not allow for a deeper interpretation of the concept of ideology. I will therefore confine myself to making a brief presentation of the two approaches used in the study: Karl Mannheim's permeation of the utopian and ideological formations (1992) and Luis Althusser's ideological interpellation (2006). Despite the differences between the above authors, in terms of both the ideological problems around which their studies developed and the nature of the findings, the common feature of their understanding of ideology is its non-normative character. It is – in their understanding – not subject to assessment or evaluation and remains beyond the assessment of falsehood or truthfulness. Only qualified assessments may concern the social effects of integrated practices.

Mannheim's ideology takes the form of the epochal social order that dominates in a given period (Mannheim 1992, pp. 49–55, 160–165). To identify and study the dynamics of change in this order, Mannheim creates complementary concepts of ideology and utopia. Ideologies are “the situationally transcendent ideas which never succeed *de facto* in the realization of their projected contents” (Mannheim 1992, p. 161). In this sense, ideology goes beyond reality. It forms a kind of layer, a filter over this reality. It builds and confirms its given version. A utopian orientation is also a vision that is not consistent with the surrounding reality, but it transcends the reality in so far as it “orients conduct towards elements which the situation, in so far as it is realized at the time, does not contain” (Mannheim 1992, p. 162)⁷. It becomes fully utopian only when it seeks to realize extra-reality imaginations, and thus begins to explode the current way of seeing the world – its dominant ideological order (Mannheim 1992, p. 159). This reservation allows to distinguish between ideological and utopian orientations. Both refer to a transcendent form of reality and both go beyond it, but the ideological awareness confirms the existing vision of the world, while the utopian consciousness explodes it. Mannheim's concept is used in this article to interpret parents' actions as part of the questions about the subject and consequences of parental critical attitude in building the utopia of a new educational environment, in the face of the obvious, based on the old, “system school” ideology, and its subsequent implementation in the form of ideological formation.

Interpretations related to the motives or conditions of these activities are continued with reference to Althusser's concept. History remembers him,

⁷ In this sense, it can be said that utopian consciousness is located in cracks and develops therein

among other things, as the creator of the concept of interpellation – the process in which ideology turns an individual into a subject. His understanding of ideology is primarily functional. It acts as a “subcutaneous” explanation of the world. It reveals itself and materializes in social practices. According to the philosopher, it is not reduced to an individual’s thoughts, but lies in the very situation that this individual and his or her practices are a part of (Eagleton 1991, pp. 18–19). In other words, ideology materializes in the form of social practices and thus, becomes an immanent part of what a person does and how he or she does it. Ideology in social practices constitutes a version of the world and thus creates a space for experiencing it for individuals and groups. This is the reproduction – one of the two functions of ideology. Its purpose is to make the world in which the subject lives appear as obvious and natural. It legitimizes it, it naturalizes the prevailing order, and shapes the right way an individual experiences their relationship with the world, which remains obvious and eternal (Althusser 2006).

The second function of Althusser’s ideology is transforming individuals into subjects. This happens in the process of interpellation, during which the specific social and political identity is imposed on the individual. The potential of interpellation lies in naming what constitutes the subject. This naming of an individual at the same time equips the individual with desires, imaginations, meanings, expectations and obligations. To illustrate the mechanism of interpellation, Althusser describes a street incident, during which, when a policeman calls out, “Hey, you there” – we turn our heads (Althusser 2006, p. 23). As we are called, we know that we are called and by turning our heads and confirming that it really is about us, we confirm the rightness of the call and we receive identity. Althusser’s interpellation concept will serve to analyze the second problem: *What makes this phenomenon happen?* It allows to ask a question about the ideology that “calls” parents.

In the further part of the article, I will present the first level of interpretation referring to parental activities (*What is happening?*) and discuss the critical attitude of parents towards the existing reality. At this level, the conceptualizations intersect mainly with two categories: the vision of school and education and the vision of the child and childhood. The second level deepens the analysis with the ideological context of the activities discussed at the first level (*What makes this phenomenon happen?*). Here, the conceptualizations intersect with all three categories, emphasizing the vision of a parent and parenthood (being a parent), and what it involves.

...if it can be done, my children will definitely not be sitting for 45 minutes /O09/ – parents against the existing school reality

“Awakening” which consists of asking the question about the validity of the reality available outside the window, is a condition for generating ideas that go beyond the dominant interpretation of the world. In this critical background to the question about the validity of a certain version of the world, the ability to reveal the previously concealed dimensions of social life is born.

Parents participating in the study, rooted in a certain order of life (all socialized in the communist Polish “system schools”, a certain ideology), by launching a critical attitude and own reflexivity, they question the status quo. A school reality ceases to appear to them as a coherent, logical and necessary system. The hitherto ideology that strengthens and supports the coherence of its experience is scattered, and the current version of reality irretrievably loses its obviousness: „to me at the time the additional element was [...] realizing that the functioning model of schools, the popular one, is not universal and the only one, it was always like this and this is what learning is like, but to the contrary – this is something relatively new [...] it is relevant to the culture and development of societies in the world and is obvious when one thinks about it now, but I kind of never gave it any thought before” /O09/. This sudden realization that the world, which appears as obviousness and necessity, as the order of things, may not be that at all, encourages further deconstruction of the phenomenon of the system education and its further criticism.

Drawing on various sources: my own and other’s experiences as a student and a student’s parent, scientific studies and articles, and finally one’s own ideas about the child and its developmental needs, parents create a vision of a “system school” as a discredited and unserious institution. They blame the content that the children are taught and ways of presenting that content: „lots of knowledge that I learned at school which I don’t use.” /O09/; „the message at school is: this is how things need to be and one could not conceive that he or she could be able to change that, because renaissance in history is something completely (laughing) different from the renaissance in Polish language” /O01/. Parents accuse school of fake individualization of education, blocking full development, including creativity, critical thinking and the ability to cooperate. They unmask activities aimed at subordination, enslavement, taking control of education against the child’s assumed need for independence, responsibility, autonomy, creativity: „I said ‘that’s enough’ when Julek got another F for, say, forgetting his compass” /M02-1/; „...he’ll find his way into

a place that will tell him: OK, there must be order, first hard work, then maybe you earn your pleasures, if the child behaves or something it will get rewards.”/MO01/. Parents are offended by the discourse of efficiency, the cult of standardization and parameterization, which has become a standard in Polish schools: „I sat at the parent’s council meeting where they were showing percentages and tables, explaining which class is where, performance and the sort, right? Why? How much the percentages grew and what the headmaster is going to do with this – well now I really feel hopeless.”/O09/; „...The person standing in class in front of my child does not see her at all. All this person wants is for the little bugs to move their feet in unison, yes? All need to move at precisely the same clip and best wear the same clothes too...”/M05/; „...I don’t want my child to be formatted, squeezed into the some form, with all excess clipped and trimmed.”/M12-1/

The parents’ criticism is consistent with both the scientific trend of pedagogical criticism of school (including Dudzikowa and Knasiecka-Falbierska, 2013), and the modern concepts in the field of neurodidactics, condemning the school organization of teaching (Żylińska 2013; Hüther and Hauser 2014). Parents efficiently use the available presentations and formulations from various scientific disciplines and trends. They talk about brain development, freedom and autonomy, symbolic violence, production of workers, the past, industrial era, Bismarck, education for the distant reality of industrial society. The arguments they cite harmonize with those made by the creators of the schools of the new upbringing and progressivism trend, emerging over the last 100 years and present in the stream of alternative and democratic education, currently active in various countries.

Language in use attracts attention in parental criticism of the “system school”. The words that are used refer to the experiences of oppression and subordination, for example: enforcement, disciplining, equalizing, cutting, evaluating, scoring, unlearning, punishing, inhibiting, questioning. What the parents say and how they say it determines the space that deviates from their expectations, one that is extremely negatively associated, and above all – distant from what they require from the school – to enable children to holistically learn about the world and themselves acting in this world. “System school” remains far from what they want for their “exceptional” children (unique, sensitive, trusting, curious persons, and possessing unquestionable dignity persons).

Deeply disappointed with the available education system, they rightly ask the question about what legitimizes it at all? And they find the answer – 1) obsolete social needs: „...we are producing all-rounded employees – we cut off anything that sticks out above or below, average everything out – that’s

the plan: execute /O03 /: „and so we get back to the purpose of school. Because the purpose of school was to educate the masses [...] to create the good worker, well qualified laborer – we’re talking Bismarck here [...] well, today we’re shooting for the good corporate material”/M06/, and 2) social acceptance of the illusory vision of happiness and prosperity in the form of future prestigious roles, primarily professional ones: „...could you embrace that the kid would choose to be a happy, I dunno, trash guy; it doesn’t have to be the corporate clone produced by the system, the school system in place,”/O03/, „...I am ready to accept that my children will not be anybody important to society [...] I can bring myself to accept that my son will become a shoeshine man if he chooses so. As long as he’s a happy shoeshine man, I have no right to interfere and force him to become a lawyer, a doctor or whatever,” /M07/.

Parents, who express readiness to go beyond the obviousness of professions socially defined as prestigious, namely: a doctor, a lawyer or a corporate employee, shift the criticism of school deeper, beyond its malfunctioning, towards the effects of its operation in both the supposedly successful version (corporate employee)⁸ and the unsuccessful one (masses in the labor market). Parents therefore reject the school function that conditions students to common values, goals, tasks, definitions of success and happiness, and ways to achieve them. In this way they question the obviousness not only of school, but also the obviousness of a broader social order in which employment in an international corporation is still treated as desirable and prestigious.

Questioning the ideological elements of the living environment and the need to overcome them situates the actions of parents within the framework of the utopian formation. Within such, an extensive criticism of the education system and school does not result in the need for efforts to change and improve this system, but in the need to build a new order. In the perspective of parents, the whole system seems to be resistant to necessary, more serious modifications, and they find the actions on the microscale unsatisfactory: „... it’s like a matrix made of thousands of minute elements, cogs. You move one, several adjacent are displaced, but the rest remains without change. You won’t change this within the timeframe that will matter to your child” /M02/. In criticizing and unmasking the illusion of the system, along with its missions, values and methods, the parents are freed from the patterns of the “old” or-

⁸ <http://natemat.pl/16699,marzenie-studentow-pracowac-w-ernst-young-dlaczego-mlodych-ciagnie-do-korporacji>, <http://serwisy.gazetaprawna.pl/praca-i-kariera/artykuly/901119,mlodzi-na-ryнку-pracy-korporacja-splnieniem-marzen-a-kariera-wazniejsza-niz-rodzina.html>, <https://www.pb.pl/13-firm-w-ktorych-kazdy-chce-pracowac-697446>,

der. The criticism of the school within this formation determines the crystallization of the utopian vision of a new order. The utopian orientation changes into an ideological one as it begins to change the vision of the world (Manheim 1992, p. 162). The criticism of the educational system plays a crucial role in strengthening of the new ideology. This ideology offers alternative visions of childhood, parenthood, learning, and upbringing. It also begins to legitimize parents' decisions and makes their choices intelligible.

Parents facing the challenge of building a new order from scratch draw from the repertoire of a new ideology. They create a new story about a child, its learning, its education. This task brings to mind an association of a family project – a *do-it-yourself* family (Beck-Gernsheim 1998). Both “making a quasi – school” and “making a family” have their analogies with the assembly of an object, a piece of furniture. It consists of inventing, selecting, and comparing various elements and solutions. All these activities fit in with the trend of individualization and reflexivity of human action in various aspects of life. They are intertwined with a critical and enlightened-rational attitude, in which people rather freely choose or select individual elements of the family life, school, a child's life, peer group, rather than being unreflectively guided by messages of custom or tradition. A DIY school is an example of a project far beyond own experience and traditional message.

By liberating themselves from the power of the school reality phantasm, questioning its necessity and obviousness, parents present themselves as emancipated entities. By implementing new visions, they also appear to be causative entities, individuals who actively take matters into their own hands, create new solutions that do not yield to external conditions and resist them. This set of features could be easily captured in the socio-pedagogical categories of activated human forces (see Radlińska 1961; Smolińska-Theiss 2004), empowerment, sub-politics (cf. Beck 2002) and/or participation. Parents are active, independent and autonomous entities that transform the conditions of their lives. Although they directly affect only the education of their own children, their actions could have a wider impact on education in general. Thus seen in the humanistic perspective, they are the personification of humanity, they have features perceived as the source and dynamics of change and, therefore, by all means desirable.

Completing the analysis at this level would, however, significantly simplify the picture and understanding of the phenomenon itself. It would ignore the whole context of the aforementioned virtues. While liberating themselves from the power of one phantasm, parents “give themselves away” and reinforce another phantasm, related precisely to the concepts of autonomy, sub-

jectivity, agency, entrepreneurship, management and effectiveness. Using these concepts, they construct themselves, their children and the family and educational environment. This new version of reality that supports their parental uncompromising actions, deserves a better understanding.

Transferring the interpellation mechanism to the ground of considerations about activated, empowered parents, who are self-assembling a quasi-school on a do-it-yourself basis, creates an opportunity to ask a question about the ideology that calls the parent to action. To discuss this mechanism, I will present an interpretation of the research material in which I refer to the *vision of a child and childhood*, the *vision of a parent and parenthood* and the *vision of school and education* as the elements significant for parents and at the same time co-produced by neoliberal ideology.

Majka [...] is a child of the forest, /M05/ – concepts of childhood and parenthood and the interpellation mechanism

Parents express admiration for children and their curiosity about the world, for the energy they exhibit, for the courage to confront their environment, their inquisitiveness, creativity, freedom, autonomy, expressiveness, criticism, tenderness, delicacy, and joy. These attributes mentioned by parents are treated as being natural, obviously residing in a child, but susceptible to external influences. Thus, a child's development is close to Rousseau's tradition of natural prosperity and the realization of one's own potential with the necessary support of an adult protecting against negative influences. This important finding has its further consequences.

Every characteristic of a child has its reverse side in the form of a question about the parent. What does this particular description of a child mean to the parent? What does it oblige the parent to do? First of all, the image of the child simultaneously creates the parent. A specific vision of the child's condition – its free development and well-being – point to the subject that generates this image, and demands that its execution be protected. Someone vigilant and sensitive to the needs of the child and the signals coming from him/her. Someone responsible and trustworthy. Someone who would protect the child in the course of the development process.

Speaking about a child is, at the same time, constructing oneself as a parent: sensitive, present, bending over a child: „...Iwo is a totally great, open child, he likes to play and specialize, likes the company of elders, he is probably not ashamed of anything at all, that's how he was raised, we have a rather open house and we ask questions, even the difficult ones” /O03/; „she

was (.) raised this way and accustomed to making her own choices and that she needn't [...] does not have to accommodate the whole group, I mean she can choose to be part of a group when she wants to and also choose the group of her liking /M05/; „...you need to earn my children's respect. It's not like if you're older [...] you are automatically a respected person in my children's eyes, right?” /M07/. Although parents sketch different pictures of their children in different ways, the common feature of their description is that everyone is tuned to their children's needs and wishes. Parents are present by their children: „...she makes various choices, which may seem hazardous when seen from the perspective of another parent, could make another parent ill at ease but I just kinda take it easy, watch and draw my conclusions” /M02/. They create space for experimentation and development for children that not only go beyond their own adolescence experience, but reach far beyond the framework of modern “system schools”.

A special way of perceiving a child and a specific construction of oneself and one's social role, are mediated by one additional experience. It is the experience of a “system school”. The parents either sense or have already experienced that schools suppress the traits of their children that they admire and nurture. When entering the area of education, they assume the role of defenders and guards of children's “elements” that they most admire. In their imagination or experience, a collision with the not-so-subtle substance of a “system school” destroys the admirable characteristics of a child, and the development of a healthy, full personality of their children is at risk: „...and the moment she found herself in a classroom where she must sit straight, keep her hands on the desk, has to ... do all these things she does not understand – why? And she asked all these questions and that was suppressed because it generally disturbed the lesson...” /M05/; “...and for the first month he came back kind of like ... dazed, you know? I had no idea, you know, he was exhausted, but also acted strange and then it all began, right? [...] He was totally stressed. But then you could say it's the change, the – you know- sitting at the desks and the lessons and all...” /M06/; „I am afraid that, [...] when he goes to first grade, he will be bored in class. And if he's going to be bored in class, [...] he'll go on to do his things, and if he's going to do that he's not going to be doing what the teacher expects of him, right?” /M11/; „And this is how we looked for some kind of solution and I remember that I caught myself thinking about how can I save my child or what kind of action I should take to support him against how school is hurting him.” /O09/.

In this perspective mainstream “system” education is perceived as a source of potential or real damage in the lives of their children. Therefore,

parents put their hope in new institutions that are oriented towards liberal individualism, especially its variety that accentuates and protects the child's subjectivity, freedom and natural development. The specific image of the child and the experience of the education system are, in a way, important elements activating the interpellation mechanism – a call to an active, committed parent, devoted to the child and responsible for it. However, both the childhood apotheosis discourse and the school criticism discourse are embedded in a broader ideology framework that provides a conceptual instrumentation for argumentation, rationalization and legitimization of actions.

I believe that the concept of the culture of individualism presented by M. Jacyno (2007) may suggest further social and political threads in order to study and interpret the phenomenon in question. The author presents various aspects and elements of the culture of individualism and places its sources in the progressive rationalization of the world. As described by Weber, Mannheim, Foucault, Beck, Giddens, Sennet, Rose, it fills the void after the retreating religious order of the world, which had organized the human experience for several centuries. The contemporary form of rationalization – medicalization and therapeutization of various spaces of human experience – reorganizes social practices and introduces new principles that integrate the social system (see Rose 1998, 1999; Sennet 2006, 2009; Weber 2010). It uses concepts like freedom, autonomy, rationality, subjectivity, entrepreneurship, only seemingly ascribing the values of the aforementioned humanistic perspective to them. In fact, it implements the agenda of population management through the governmentality of individuals (Foucault 2011, 2014; Rose 1999; Wilkins and Olmendo 2017). Managing through freedom (Rose's term) is the release of individuals from binding external structures and granting them autonomy, while disciplining internally allows them to find the power within.

Being autonomous means being unhampered – uninhibited in all aspects of life. It means managing self in a way that is not determined by external forces or instances such as family or local community. Autonomization is thus achieved by compiling private independent lifestyles that become the space of "practicing, but also gaining freedom by individuals through confirming them as authors of the choices being made" (Jacyno 2007, p. 59). "Lifestyle often assumes the meaning of a rationalized path of achieving autonomy" (Jacyno 2007, p. 60). Parental actions aimed at creating a do-it-yourself school are consistent with this interpretation.

Parental care for the harmonious development of a child is clearly located within the therapeutic culture. It manifests itself in the growing importance of experts and expert knowledge systems as well as the professionaliza-

tion and technologicalization of various areas of life. It is associated with the growing importance of the individual, the individual's inner self and the life the individual leads. Addressing one's inner self and focusing on the child's psyche and its harmonious development, as well as making the development a lifetime task, all echo in parental narratives. The care for a child's psyche manifests itself clearly. According to Jacyno, it is "... an invisible area that is overexposed, and thus revealed by psychology" (Jacyno 2007, p. 124), which stands at the center of a therapeutic culture. The material analysis reveals both the articulated and the unarticulated need to produce a mentally healthy individual, with a well-developed, protected and nurtured psyche of the child.

The psychologization and professionalization of parental practices is very clear among parents who have gathered in quasi-schools. It manifests itself through numerous references to psychological concepts, such as building relationships with children, the concepts of attachment, underlying needs, fears, and security. It also appears in the form of professionalization and psychologization of one's own parental practices. Parents improve their own psychological parenting skills. Some people undergo therapy in order to be able to better accompany their children in their development: „...when Olga was small I took initiative and started training my own interpersonal skills, I did this to be a good mom (laughing)”. /M02/; „...it's like the parent, it's like with the psychotherapist, the parent has to make the journey, he must get through therapy, he has to [...] but generally needs a supervisor to make sure he does not step off the right path, a supervisor that remains unbiased, uninvolved and sees and hears the whole situation from perspective, best of all a whole team of supervisors, yeah? And this would protect you from winding up in a dead end...” /M05/.

Parents educate themselves on non-violent communication, appropriate messages, inter – personal communication. This is not only about body care, which is also important, but about redirecting interest to care over the relationship with a child, and thus the safety of its psyche (Jacyno 2007, p. 12). Parents use available written resources, trainings, workshops or other forms of help of psychologists who turn out to be reliable informers: „...later this psychologist told me that kids, some kids simply have this great sense of shame and when they see they did wrong they recognize this themselves, they get it and feel ashamed and if you start discussing a situation right away, [I: mh] they react with aggression, [...]. So you should give it a little time, [...] talk to them later about it, /M06/; „...the psychologist told me that the education system in Poland is what it is, right? And really that he might get into trouble because he knows a lot more than his peers and she suggested that we

should develop these interests in other areas so that it does not go to waste, you know? That he develops his math skills, right? /M11/. Psychologists are often involved in the process of breaking in initiator groups as well as support these groups in day-to-day quasi-school activities: „...we went through the whole group process and we also had significant support from the psychologist all the time and I think we are all at par and on the same path – all of us I think, despite the fears and doubts” /M05/.

Parents' language undergoes psychologization: „...but I think that the free schools are about something else: identity, subjectivity, about a completely different formative process and the public school is all about learning some particular knowledge with no concern for the psyche.” /MO03/; „...and the risk is tremendous, our sensitivity, our baggage, the weight we carry as parents, [...] well I've also gone through therapy, right? I realize a lot of things now, maybe not all, but many I do – the things I burden Maja with – the mirrors that come from me and my personal background. /M05/. In parental narrations, in addition to turning towards the inner self, toward their own, and a child's psyche, and in addition to the psychological professionalization, the second element of the therapeutic culture clearly stands out, namely the idea of experiencing the authentic autonomy embedded in liberalism. An expression of this is both the legitimate activity of parents aimed at freeing themselves from the oppressive structures of the school and the social system, as well as shaping and nurturing these attitudes in children – the freedom to actively process the world: „...he is very kind of autonomous, I mean, he is not dependent on other kids, yes he always has his own point of view and this is hard for his peers to accept, right? Because this could cause exclusion from the circle of peers if we are talking several teenagers who are way out there, right? And they are seeking company and Wojtek definitely says: no... [...] so, so he's that courageous... [I: aha] and I admire this in him.” /M02/; „...Majka is... has this unbelievable imagination and relentless energy, she is born for the forest, land, space, air, water, running barefoot, one that treasures integrity and autonomy, freedom, she is a child with a limitless bag of ideas and a great curiosity for the world at large” /M05/.

Redirecting the interest to autonomy and one's inner self, caring for them, is also associated with the risk and the need to neutralize the anxiety that this risk generates. The risk pertains to the loss of emerging development opportunities, which would result from a failure to realize the child's potential. This mean that some chances would be lost. The attempts to reduce this risk involve the application of various recommendations from different knowledge systems (in this case a medical and a psychological knowledge) and the use

of various resources (including social and economic resources) to more boldly design one's own life and the lives of one's children (Jacyno 2007, p. 132). In a secularized world, the self-development and flourishing of autonomous action, that has its source in the individual's inner self, becomes a new criterion for salvation (Jacyno 2007, pp. 135–136). This inner self therefore gathers all the attention, just as the attention was previously focused on the image of God and faith in salvation; the individual well-being as well as the result of ongoing efforts, become the basis of a new division of population into the saved and the condemned.

Summary and questions

Parents who organize quasi-schools certainly set on an exciting exploration. They are like wanderers embarking on a journey into the unknown, traversers across new lands. Following the call to self-fulfillment and seeking activity, they enter foreign territories in the hope of taming and conquering them. They justify their decisions and choices by referring to the ideas already embedded and known in the broader social discourse: supporting and protecting the endangered childhood of their children. Protecting their sensitive and beautiful psyche. The need to look after and protect the child's development seems to be a dogma – a total truth. It is difficult to argue with it. At the same time, it places parenthood and parental undertakings outside the social structure, in the neutral space of individual psyche and individual development. Concentrating on the bustle around one's own and a child's development, diverts attention from issues related to the social, cultural and economic background of the phenomenon, and ignores the problem of varying access to tools to support or stimulate this development and education. Although the psyche appears to be egalitarian and is equally available to all (cf. Urbańska 2012), it requires development that is not egalitarian. It uses resources that are not evenly distributed – and equally available – in the social structure.

Parents involved in the creation and the development of quasi-schools are socially and culturally privileged. They are well-off, have extensive social, cultural and economic capital at their disposal, and as a result of their professions, also a symbolic capital. They have the “power” and control over what is possible and what is necessary in this world, and thus have a real influence on the existing ideas of the world.

The use of the interpellation concept in the interpretation allows to shift focus from the parental activities to the social context, and thus allows to pose a question about the social structure, in which the activities are embedded.

It allows to look at the increased activity of some parents as the mechanism for maintaining the prevailing social divisions and cultural differences and, as a result, reproduction of the social order. In this perspective, the promised change and the expected emancipation seems to be apparent, while in fact it creates distances between the socially – divided groups of parents. It concerns, after all, the images of the world that are inaccessible to the rest of the population, which have become “stuck” in the systemic – primarily public – education. The essential issue here that requires sensitivity and better understanding is the emergence of a working hypothesis of potential neo-liberal dismantling of the public school space. By assigning individuals the right to be active in the sphere of education of children and the responsibility for it (in the interpellation process) – the state would gradually become free from the obligation and responsibility for education of all citizens (see Mendel 2015; van Zanten and Kosunen 2013; Barcan 2010).

The above conclusions and hypotheses give rise to questions related to social practice: Should such initiatives be banned and parents’ implementation of new projects interfered with?⁹ I believe that they should not. This ban, in my view, is a reckless, impulsive reaction characterized by ignorance and a lack of understanding of the complexity and depth of the phenomenon. Instead, the functioning of quasi-schools should be carefully examined and studied. One should explore the latent senses that constitute the conceptual and logical instruments that the operating entities use to rationalize and legitimize the emerging social practices. At the same time, one should search for radically new ways to organizing public schools. This is not about introducing perfunctory pro-quality activities, such as moving education stages, education age, discussions about carpets in rooms and the height at which washbasins are installed. I am talking about an urgent revision of the meanings of learning, development, knowledge, the concepts of a child and childhood, the role of a teacher and one of an adult (see Klus-Stańska 2012), which are the concepts that constitute the most basic level of constructing a complex configuration of educational environment for all children. The quasi-schools created by the new middle class reflect the condition of the school on the level of social, legitimated representations, and can immediately become the beginning of its in-depth and necessary reform. Smaller classes, atmosphere of mutual

⁹ Actions of the authorities in late 2016 limiting parents’ choices regarding the selection of the school that educates the student in the out-of-school education process and indicating public psychological and pedagogical counseling centers as the only institutions authorized to issue opinions about out-of-school education may suggest this trend.

respect, holistic thinking about learning, well – equipped and knowledgeable teachers ... Sounds like a utopia – a vision that is worth nurturing and achieving for the widest possible group of children.

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