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Parents as the driving force of democracy (Sub-table No. 2)

On 17 September 2018, within the framework of the „sub-table” discussions organized at the Congress of Social Pedagogy, the following researchers and representatives of theory and practice from all over the country sat down at a common table: Anna Błasiak from the Ignatianum Academy, Józefa Brągiel from the University of Opole, Dr. Barbara Chojnacka-Synaszko from the University of Silesia in Katowice, Małgorzata Ciczowska-Giedziuń and Bożena Chrostowska from the University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn, Iwona Dąbrowska-Jabłońska from the University of Opole, Ewa Dybowska from the Ignatianum Academy, Anna Górka-Strzałkowska from the Maria Grzegorzewska University and Public Primary School No. 2 in Warka, Patrycja Kaszubska from the University of Opole, Joanna Ostrouch-Kamińska from the University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn, Elżbieta Piotrowska-Gromniak from the Stowarzyszenie Rodzice w Edukacji (the Parents in Education Association), Anna Sternal from the Parents’ Council at Primary School No. 78 in Poznań, Elżbieta Tołwińska-Królikowska from the Warsaw Centre for Socio-Educational Innovation and Training, Klaudia Węc from the Ignatianum Academy. The section was led by Maria Mendel from the University of Gdańsk and Marta Wiatr from the Maria Grzegorzewska University in Warsaw. The discussion sought the meaning and importance of parent engagement as power in democratic processes. The wider context for the discussion was the educational system and the role of parents in its operation and changes.

“Sub-table” No. 2 work plan

The work of the section was carried out according to a previously prepared plan. It provided for a short introduction, establishing a common ground for discussion, during which the participants presented and discussed issues, questions and concerns regarding parents as co-creators of democratic forms of social coexistence both inside and outside school. Different voices allowed for the mapping of splices, knots, climaxes and other elements represented in this report.

After the discussion, the NGO and school activists shared their experiences recalling various practices, projects and programs. The session closed with a phase of conclusions and recommendations.

Central categories of the discussion

The thesis on the parent engagement as power of democracy has become the basic assumption and the framework for the discussion. It was based on a combination of Theodore Brameld’s approach (2014), who understood education as a „force” for social activism and shaping a „better world”, with concepts of non-consensual democracy, emphasizing the indispensability and importance of conflict, which are key to achieving social equality (Biesta 2011; Koczanowicz 2015; Mouffe 2005; Rancière 1999; etc.). In the agonistic model of democracy, particularly interesting in this context, which recognizes conflict as its basis and a necessary condition, an endless struggle of opponents clashing against each other’s views and not enemies desiring mutual annihilation – ensures the existence of a liberal-democratic society (Mouffe 2005). Agon, derived from Greek tradition, means a model of attitude and a situation of dispute in which each party interested in their own equality, seeks it for other parties. Hence agonistic pluralism sounded like a postulate in the thesis proposed, conditioning both a society based on bonds of reciprocity, as well as democracy – an „order practiced by different and equal” (Mendel 2017, p. 64). The parents, like education in Brameld’s case, constitute a force capable of shaping the world better than it is, and this force – operating in the field of agonistic pluralism – is an important potential and resource of democracy.

Meanwhile, the „reality squawks” and – as shown by the examples of great parental undertakings in recent years, inspired and scrupulously used in the political struggle of groups interested in voters’ votes – the civic activity of parents, without a background in the culture of this milieu, enabling its

political subjectivity and representation to function, boils down to forms of direct democracy, in which the several millions strong parents' population is often subject to lucrative party manipulations.

Against such a background, the participants of the „sub-table” discussed the place and activities of parents in the school space and the educational system. The conflict was already polarized in the initial phase of the discussion, in the descriptions of relations built from separate positions of the parent and teacher, and the resulting different points of view on the education of the child – pupil. The potential for conflict was also noticed within the very group of parents and revealed itself in the actions taken by the parents. Taking a closer look at them allowed us to see both inconsistency, discontinuity, as well as strengthening and synergy. Examples of parental actions included speaking out against the „unhealthy” assortment on sale in school shops and at the same time criticizing the regulations concerning the „healthy” school canteen; opposing the creation of middle schools and at the same time disagreeing with their liquidation; fighting for the limitation of children's home work and at the same time demanding its maintenance or restoration. This parental polyphony, heterogeneous, inconsistent and often contradictory, reflected the deep diversity of the group of parents.

Parents differ not only in their concepts for the child, the teacher or the school, but also in the strength of their own voice, the ability to articulate their own needs and expectations. Some parents seem to be better prepared to speak out on matters important to their child's education.

In the course of the discussion, this parental polyphony was treated as a potential that requires certain conditions to resound. Only then can it become a manifestation of democracy. It has been noted that the current model of parental engagement is above all direct democracy – manifested not only in state and local elections, but also in parental school choices and daily educational decisions. This powerful engagement of parents seems to be constantly abused, taking the form of succumbing to various forms of marketing and agitation, including political agitation. Parental citizenship is susceptible to consumer and political and party appropriation. For example, the discussion confirmed that political parties competing for voters' votes see the strength of a group of nearly 10 million potential voters and treat parental postulates and demands instrumentally. They capture moods and formulate party programs based on them. These, however, have little in common with the original intentions of the initiators of various grassroots parental movements. As a result of these manipulations, it is difficult for parents to recognize their own demands, and as a result – when abused – they bring various political

representations and subjectivities to success, while at the same time achieving nothing by themselves. Against this background of the out-of-school image of engagement of parents, manipulated by party-political mechanisms, a question arose about a democracy other than direct – about participatory democracy – its places, conditions, participants and consequences in the form of resistance to political manipulation. For parents to be self-organized and to become subjective in such a way as to guarantee their place and visibility/audibility in a democratic order. In participatory democracy, a space was seen to build a parental culture that broadens awareness and thus builds protection against political or marketing appropriation. Accepting a different perspective on the description of parents – not as an easy to „take over” group of voters, but as a group established in participatory practice and drawing its strength from the culture of speaking out, also gives hope for an improvement in the democratic condition of the Polish society. The leading question became the question about the school itself as an institution with the potential to create a space in which participatory democracy can develop, a space in which different voices can be heard. The important question is: where can these voices be heard and who articulates them (according to gender, cultural environment, social class, etc.)? As well as emphasizing the diversity of perspectives within the group of parents, attention was also drawn to the diversity of schools as institutions – institutions that open up space for the emergence and resonance of different voices of participants in the school community to a greater or lesser extent.

The search for conditions for parental participation led to discussions on illusive patterns and games of appearances. They as has been pointed out, concerns democracy itself, as well as subjectivity, partnership or participation in school. The participants of the discussion pointed to two levels of „appearances”: institutional and individual. At the institutional level, a school which, although it declares education for democracy, socializes to undemocratic attitudes. This is manifested in the transmission style of teaching and the dependent teacher entangled in numerous external and internal institutional limitations and obligations; in the lack of space for the subjectivity and responsibility of the pupil and the teacher; and finally in the structure of formal parental empowerment. The structural reality is transformed into a functional plane in which the actors operate within a specific system and the child is socialized to function and adapt to it, instead of questioning it or changing it. A school institution in which the teacher is not treated as subject, causative and responsible, does not have the possibility to create for the student an environment in which the student will be able to become subject, causative or responsible. Neither the teacher nor the student finds

a space for real participation and speaking, expressing, articulating needs, expectations, questions, doubts. The current legal solutions, closing the case in the area of lofty declarations of parents' subjective participation in school life and education of their children, in this perspective are also only a game of appearances.

It has been pointed out that the entanglement and intertwining of different positions makes it even more complicated to be able to speak out in this structure. Thus, a parent's position in school is not isolated from the child's position and the possibility for the parent to get involved, especially in the criticism of school reality, also binds the child of a given parent (pupil of a specific teacher). A polyphony in such a structure is „simply” an impossible and irremovable conflict, which – instead of provoking agonism – becomes obscure and – developing under various masks – grows into forms far from democratically practiced discord.

The appearance of the parents' attachment to the structure of the parents' council takes the form of an „abscess”. It consists of *including the excluded* (cf.: Rancière 1999). The Parental Council, mentioned and described in the *Educational Law* (Journal of Laws 2017, item 59), is an organ isolated from other organs, such as student self-government, the Pedagogical Council or the management board. As such, it can successfully isolate parents from actual participation in school life and making decisions about important issues in the school community. Numerous examples cited by various participants of the „sub-table” made it possible to understand the mechanism of operation of these structures. They provide for an isolated place (parents' council) where parents can discuss matters with each other, but the outcome of these discussions or their conclusions are of little importance to the school environment. The example of parents striving to talk directly with the educator of their children about topics that are important and incomprehensible to them, and through this educator redirected to the parents' council as an organ dedicated to them, illustrates the mechanism of invalidating the voice of parents and the needs of parents. Invalidation takes place in the form of a referral to a body whose activities are of little importance to school life. This situation can be described as a discussion without discussion. Meanwhile, the condition for participation is such a space, and thus also such a structure that assumes that different voices will sound and be heard, listened to. Against the background of these considerations, a question was asked about the extent to which the culture of parental participation in a school institution can be supported by building a democratic family and cultivating democratic values within the family.

The game of appearances was also noticed at the level of individual, parental actions. They seem to be inscribed in the post-democratic reality (Crouch 2004). They seemingly allude to democratic processes or mechanisms – referring to empowerment, emancipation, participation and involvement, *de facto* they serve individual goals and particular interests. Parents use the slogans of activity, entrepreneurship and involvement to support the model of a neoliberal citizen (Reay 2014). At the same time, they limit themselves to caring for the interests of their own child and nothing else. In the lofty slogans of participation or democracy, filled with significant content rooted in neoliberal ideology, there is no space to build what is common, to take care of each other and of the place for „everyday solidarity”.

Reflections on the neoliberal parent provoked further discussion on the relation between particularism and universalism; on the relation between what is in the individual interest and what is related to the care for the „common good” and what serves it. Numerous examples as well as references to research indicated a possible continuum from particularism to universalism.

Interest and willingness to participate in children’s education begins with the parent when the child’s education begins at an educational institution. Real involvement is connected, as the researchers stressed, often with the harm done to the child or with the need to act for the good of the child. These are the moments when parents’ involvement is triggered. Starting each time with one’s own child – its harm or well-being, parental involvement can evolve to reflect on the „common cause” – on the change in the conditions of education or even the social order. In the aforementioned research on the undertakings of parents of children with disabilities, Bożena Chrostowska pointed out that these parents are committed to their children, but being also members of support groups, it is where they draw, among other things, their knowledge, strength and motivation from. What is more, support groups provide parents with a space for discussion, questions, doubts, searching for solutions, interpretation of the context of the undertaking. They create the conditions for consciousness development. They make it possible to look more broadly at the child, at the classroom, at the school environment or at society and its order. The willingness to walk the path from being an advocate for one’s own child to acting for the change of social order, especially on the example of parents with children with disabilities, confirms the possibility of a continuum. In this sense, the good of the child and action for his or her benefit is also action for the good of others and may become the seed of action for the development of the common good – a common educational environment, the practice of a culture of participation. Developing and working for the

common good opens up space for polyphony and conflict, which can become constructive. The slogans of *harm* or *well-being of a child* or *common good* become slogans to be filled with competing content of various voices – those of parents, teachers, students. However, if these slogans of *child well-being*, *harm*, *cooperation* and *partnership*, *commitment* and *participation* are filled with content unilaterally produced by the institution, treated as unquestionable or are appropriated by content rooted in the neoliberal order, then the space for participation ceases to exist.

In the situation of structural and functional „abscess” of parental organs in school space or appropriation of school space by neoliberal narration of some parents focused on particular interests, and also in the face of political appropriation of parents’ voices in the space outside school, a key issue emerged, namely the urgent need to create a safe and open space where conflict is possible and its importance in the process of developing democracy is recognized.

Good practices

In the second part of the „sub-table” session, various activities, projects and programs for the development of parental involvement or participation in children’s education were presented. Elżbieta Tołwińska-Królikowska presented the ministerial programme „Szkoła Współpracy. Uczniowie i rodzice kapitałem społecznym nowoczesnej szkoły”, (“School of Cooperation. Pupils and parents – the social capital of a modern school”), implemented in 2013/2014 and 2015 in partnership with the Foundation for the Development of National Education¹. The aim of the project was to strengthen cooperation between pupils, parents and teachers as well as representatives of local communities operating in kindergartens and schools in Poland. The aim of the project was to inspire school and kindergarten environments to implement good cooperation practices. It was assumed that the key to this process was to bring about lasting changes in the perception of the role of pupils and parents in the work of schools and kindergartens. The project provided for the diagnosis of the state of cooperation and expectations towards it, development of appropriate solutions conducive to cooperation, creation and provision of a knowledge base on the active participation of parents in the life of schools and kindergartens. The project covered 6600 people (students, teachers and

¹ <http://szkolawspolpracy.pl/o-projekcie/>.

parents) from 1200 schools. The participants took part in workshops, trainings and debates, during which they prepared to plan and carry out activities aimed at strengthening cooperation between the whole school community and institutions/representatives of the local community.

Elżbieta Tołwińska-Królikowska also mentioned the ongoing programme: „Szkoły Aktywne w Społeczności” (SAS) (“Schools Active in Communities”)² in an international partnership of European and Asian NGOs supported by the British International Centre of Excellence for Community Schools (ICECS). Its aim is to create a network of schools that meet international standards of community schools. Polish schools have been participating in the partnership since 2012. The coordinating entities are non-governmental organizations: Federacja Inicjatyw Oświatowych (FIO) (Federation of Educational Initiatives), and since autumn 2016, the newly established Fundacja Innowacji Edukacyjnych „Mała Szkoła” (Foundation of Educational Innovations „Small School”). Within the framework of the program, schools which develop cooperation with the community are equipped with tools to facilitate the improvement of this cooperation and the whole of the school’s work. Important activities of the program include diagnosis, development of partnerships with entities operating in the local environment and joint solving of problems important for students, families and entire communities. The SAS Program is targeted at pupils and school staff, pupils’ parents, the school environment – non-governmental organizations, companies and institutions operating locally, local authorities. Among the highlighted areas of work such as leadership, social inclusion, partnership, services, volunteering, lifelong learning, community development, organizational culture, learning by understanding, the involvement of parents is also an important element. Its aim is to support and involve parents in their children’s education as a positive factor influencing school education and as an element embedded in the wider structure of the local community.

Elżbieta Piotrowska-Gromniak, President of the Parents in Education Association, presented a four-year Warsaw-based program: „Warszawskie Forum Rad Rodziców” (“Warsaw Forum of Parents’ Councils”)³. It started in 2007 and took the form of regular meetings and discussions focusing on parenthood and parental role in school, child development and education, the importance of parenthood and the role of parents in school. Over the course of four years, nine parental meetings have been organized on topics such as:

² https://www.wcies.edu.pl/media/system/pdf/informacja_sas.pdf.

³ <http://rodzicwedukacji.pl/kategoria/projekty/warszawskie-forum-rodzicow-i-rr/>.

parents' councils in Warsaw schools and kindergartens, safe school, changes in school, quality of learning, good practices, school climate, development of children's talents, school democracy, teaching and upbringing or youth authorities.

In addition to representatives of parents' councils and parents' and teachers' associations, these meetings were attended by principals, educational officials and other persons interested in the role of parents in the education of children at school. The aim of the meetings was to capture the models of operation of the parents' councils in selected Warsaw schools, to see the benefits of the school's cooperation with parents, to disseminate information about changes in the law on the education system, to exchange experiences and information, to support the development of cooperation between all school environments, to involve parents in strategic thinking about the education system, to initiate cooperation of parent associations with schools and teacher associations, as well as to plan further joint activities.

During the series of meetings, the participants had the opportunity to discuss a wide range of issues related to the functioning of the school and school parents' councils, issues related to the upbringing and education of children, the way parents' councils operate – organizational, legal, financial, administrative aspects, issues related to the development and discovery of talents, education and upbringing. Difficulties encountered in schools, such as the lack of willingness to cooperate and to treat each other as partners or the problem in building the autonomy of the parents' council, were also discussed.

Anna Sternal, Chairwoman of the Parents' Council at Primary School No. 78 in Poznań, stressed the need to build trust in the relations between parents and teachers, in addition to courage and determination in the implementation of the above mentioned goals. The Chairwoman of the Parents' Council saw this organ as a space for parents, as a space for them to take over, but in such a way that would not antagonize parents with the teaching staff or the management. Anna Sternal presented her experiences as the chairwoman of the parents' council in times of „war” and „peace” and pointed out important differences. In times of conflict, parental involvement was high and „generous”, while in times of partnership building, the motivation and involvement of most parents decreased. The chairwoman stressed that partnership, as a way of acting, must be developed every time and that it is aimed both at cooperation between parents and teachers (this is based on mutual trust and cooperation) and parents and parents (where it is necessary to develop sensitivity to different voices, including extreme voices, and to ensure that they can resound). Anna Sternal listed activities which, in the experience of parents from the Primary

School No. 78 in Poznań, raised the level of involvement (of both parents and teachers) for change and development of the school educational environment of children. Among the good practices, the President mentioned various types of motivators for involving parents in activities aimed at the benefit of the school. As an important element of this process, she mentioned the joint application for funds for infrastructural, educational or didactic facilities, which change the educational reality of children „here and now”. At the same time, they give great satisfaction to the actors and have a positive impact on the school’s social capital, which in turn is the building block of the school’s positive climate. The chairwoman stressed the importance of parents being fully represented at Parents’ Council meetings, parents’ participation in the meetings of the Pedagogical Council and the participation of teachers and management in Parents’ Council meetings. In the foreground Anna Sternal put good cooperation and good relations at the level of the school team. They can trigger good relations with the educator and teacher and increase the social capital of the class as well as the whole school. The chairwoman of the parents’ council also mentioned the mechanism of mutual inspiration of class teams and co-financing by the parents’ council of class initiatives, as well as the sharing of tasks by parents.

Summary

Among the various opinions, expressed by representatives of both practice and theory, there was a clear need to search for and create „safe” spaces in which the polyphony of different participants of the school community could resound, in which the conflict could take place openly and be understood as a condition of democratic practices and valuable common good; which would not be exposed to political and party appropriation and manipulation; and which would not create the appearance of democracy, through the „abscess” of school organs in the overpowering mechanism of inclusion through exclusion. It became urgent and important to find a space where conflict is possible, thanks to which the polyphony of equals resounds, building the reality of Polish education that is socialized for real, and not within the framework of window dressing.

The discussion highlighted the role of the university as an institution that can support school self-government. The proposal to take parental councils „under the custody” of higher education institutions was considered to be worthwhile. It was pointed out that a university can create both a physical space for valuable meetings and discussions between parents, between parents

and teachers and between parents, teachers and pupils, and can become a mediator, a facilitator for building and developing relationships within a group of parents, parents and teachers and parents, teachers and pupils; provide knowledge, present research results, but also undertake joint research. The importance of the role of facilitator was emphasized by the representatives of the practical side of things, indicating that the so-called „third party” can be an important element facilitating the development of relations between different groups of participants in the school community.

Attention was drawn to the need to create multiannual – sustainable – support programs for a real, rather than apparent and eternally faked partnership (it is known that this type of relationship is very dynamic and cannot be limited to the sense of equality achieved once. Striving to achieve it should be constant); a dialogue that develops not only relations between individual participants of the school community, but also develops the school as a place of democratic practices (a place of community) and the life of its neighborhood, of which it is a part. It has been noted that as long as the school does not become an institution guarding the polyphonic voice of all participants in the school community in shaping the educational reality of pupils, the programs and projects aimed at supporting cooperation and partnerships must be of a permanent nature, each time supporting those whose voice is least heard or excluded.

Attention was drawn to the importance of relations at the micro level – developed in class groups, between parents. It was suggested that places be created there, first of all, that are conducive to parental polyphony and then include educators, teachers, other teams, in order to slowly but consistently move towards a change in the order of institutions, the broader social order towards democracy, which occurs when it is within us and is within us on a daily basis.

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