Education is Power and Parents are Force

Foreword

The volume presented here would not have been possible without the 12th Biennial Conference of the European Research Network About Parents in Education (ERNAPE) that took place in Gdansk on September 18-20, 2019: *Parent Engagement as Power: Empowering Children, Schools and Societies[1]*. Most of the articles presented in the volume are papers delivered at the conference and later modified as a result of conference discussions and peer reviewing. As it was stated in the conference book, the message embedded in the network's name is that parents are part of education (Mendel 2019: 9). Following the message of Theodore Brameld's book *Education is Power*, one can say that parents are those who share and shape its force (1965). This broad issue has a complex nature that needs to be examined. On the one hand, we should see parents as citizens whose engagement is crucial in acts of direct democracy: from their "voting with feet" while they make decisions concerning the choice of educational institutions, to their sustained work in social movements and organizations like *Sanctuary Schools, Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools, Our Cities Our Schools*, etc. This points to the complex relations between private lives and political activism. As schools have become subject to controversial policies, like those connected to urban marketing or gentrification and school closures, being a parent shows its political face in a direct way probably unknown to previous generations.

One should speak, in this context, of new ways of understanding parental experiences. Not only are the notions of struggle, success or defeat linked to the parent—child relations, concerning issues of upbringing, support or care; being a parent in the time when schools are sites of political struggles the results of which affect the education of children, parental defeat or success gain a political dimension as well. There are stories and narratives of spectacular success, as well as anger and disappointment; stories and narratives that are the subject of research, the results of which can be shared. Some of them were presented during the aforementioned conference in Gdansk, some are presented in this volume. There are sustainable local community schools emerging as the result of parental engagement and self-organization; there are schools that, owing to the engagement of parents in their close cooperation with teachers, local activists and municipalities, truly become shared places where one does not have to teach about democracy but where democracy is enacted and experienced. I do not expect or wish to see such complex experiences being told as idyllic and easy, but nor as utterly hopeless either. They are dichotomized between triumph and despair. Following Jacques Rancière, one may say that all meaningful education implies some *interruption*, that it involves friction, or collision with otherness (Rancière 1999; see also: Biesta 2012; 2017; Stovall 2016). In a sense, meaningful education shares this feature with democracy, which is unthinkable without conflict played in a disagreement condition, in clashes involving opponents who want to prove their case, not enemies who want to annihilate each other. Thus, both democracy and education are unthinkable without politics; politics as building a common world, *polis*. I would like to stay a little longer on this issue, thus shaping the quite important context of the content of this volume.

Parent engagement is power and parents are a force, also a political force. This is the thesis that I would like to argue first by paying attention to the political character of parent engagement and of the area under study ("parents in education"), then the presentation of the position that parents occupy in the framework of direct democracy and citizenship.

Researchers interested in parents and education rarely see this area as politically relevant and their research as politically significant. Often focusing their attention on the need to

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[1] I had the pleasure of chairing the committee organizing this conference.

cooperate and strengthen ties between the school and other educational institutions, the family and the local community or society, parents are seen as an important element of the environment that is worth striving for to meet these needs. As stated by the editors of the previous volume of IJPE, Stefano Castelli and Eddie Denessen, *closer scrutiny reveals that the label of "parental involvement" is an umbrella term, under which many different concepts and practices find a place* (Castelli, Denessen 2019: 1).

One could perceive it as an expression of the dominant paradigm (Gold, Simon, Brown 2002: 10). This paradigm's representations are concentrated in three categories: parent involvement, community involvement and parent engagement, although some researchers - like Ferlasso - speak about only two being possible to distinguish because they see parent involvement as synonymous with community involvement (Ferlasso 2011: 10-14).

This whole paradigm manifests various forms of politics, regardless of whether the researchers themselves see it or not. Their activities in the field of parent involvement, community involvement or parent engagement may not always be politically involved, but they are never politically innocent.

This is evident, for example, in the criticism of parent involvement and rhetoric of partnership involving parents. The criticism in question concentrates in the research-confirmed statement that the principles of partnership are usually dictated by one side and parents are rarely the side, and never parents from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, e.g. immigrants or the poor. The school is usually the "partner" dominating and subordinating parents, especially the weak, as political entities. Schools are seen as functional in relation to the socio-political and legal system defending the *status quo*; they reflect mainstream culture and use partnerships to develop it, etc. The discourse of partnership is therefore of political and class nature, as the researchers of social inequalities that develop, for example, on racial grounds, write clearly. One can recall here works that in analysis and interpretations of "partnership" involve one of the versions of Foucauldian power, *governmentality*, and show the analyzed relationships as relationships of control and dominion (Dahlstedt 2009; Christie 2006; many others). In this context, one can recall also my research, carried out in Poland, two other European Union countries, and the USA, where I speak of an "expert discourse" in which family-school-local community partnerships are the expressions of the implementation of expert, *a priori* knowledge of teachers, convinced of having *know how* in this area, and not real co-creation of partner relations with parents (Mendel 2001).

This parent/community involvement, finding the fullest expression in home-school cooperation, focuses on understanding parents as partners, strengthening the work of teachers and school. This approach can represent the concept of partnership created in the 1990s. by Joyce L. Epstein, which emphasizes the role of parents as partners and - warning against the "false" or concealed dominance version of the partnership - promotes it as a form of their relations with the school and teachers. Essentially, this approach is associated with her *Theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence* which is an excellent ground for conceptualizing the changing relationships between family, school, and local community (Epstein 1995). The author puts a special emphasis on the parental role of partners, which is most widely manifested in her rich methodological creativity [Epstein et al. 2019 (prior editions: 1997, 2002; 2009)].

Stefano Castelli and Eddie Denessen – *via* articles presented in the previous special issue of IJAPE – tried to delve more deeply into controversies and dilemmas that result from the variety of perspectives on parental involvement. They listed some examples of such controversies and dilemmas: *the use of parental involvement as a predictor of academic achievement in school effectiveness studies, parents' rights and teachers' stress, critiques on the neoliberal agenda that dictates effective parenting practices, inequality of access to diverse forms of parental resources, and the marginalizing effects of particular frameworks of parental involvement* (Castelli, Denessen 2019: 1). This results in some flickering meanings and multi-threading of the concept of parental involvement, which *de facto* confirms the paradigmatic formula of researchers' thinking in this respect. The content of these multiple meanings also confirms their political entanglements, though not necessarily directly and not always clearly.

The third category, parent engagement, brings together figures of thinking and action that occur at the level of clearly political solutions. It expresses the focus on the practice of participation and support by parents and members of the community of possibly professionally designed and strategically implemented socio-cultural-educational initiatives. In this approach, parental involvement is a way of building public support for public education; is public aid for public education (Gold, Simon, Brown 2002: 10). This is an expression of Dewey's and Brameld's understanding of the school as a form of civic action, democratic social practices, always with a focus on the specificity of this community or the "ethos of the community" (Brameld 1965).

Summing up the meaning of parent engagement, it can be said that it not only binds the sense of parent/community involvement, but that this sense is constantly transforming as well. This happens when the community reaches the level of participation in planning and management, and the thinking that permeates this process is characterized by the belief that school success and community development are one thing, an identical whole.

Turning to the next argument of the thesis about the politics of power, which is parents and their commitment, as well as research related to this, I will pay attention to the parental potential in direct democracy[2]. Let's start by saying that in a sociological sense, parents create a community, but they do not form a coherent one. This is a huge and heterogeneous population, and the assessment of its consistency must depend on the criteria by which its description is developed. Parents bind in differently configured communities. If they have school-age children, we can talk about a relatively coherent parental community, building numerous relationships mediated through school and children's education issues. I am mainly thinking about this community. Depending on the population of the country, they can be hundreds of thousands or millions of people. For example, in Poland parents constitute a group of over ten million people, nearly a quarter of the total population of Poland. For this reason - but not only for this - they are a politically significant force. It is probably not only in Poland that they do not have their institutional representation and hence do not run in the elections themselves. However, it is not difficult to see how fierce the battle is for their numerous votes. Competing parties profile their programs anticipating parental reactions, which leads to sometimes controversial postulates, election promises and declarations of supporting parental grass root movements. The authenticity of these movements, which can be inferred from their bottom-up nature, is therefore questionable, and the subjectivity of the parents forming them may be apparent. I have been writing about this for years, noting the need to shape parental cultures grounded in the idea of democratization of social and school life, supported by teachers, principals, school leaders, local communities, etc. (Mendel 2000, 2001, 2007, etc.). A strong culture that parents would create "among themselves" would, in electoral democracy conditions, quickly become the basis of their new political identity and representation, easily falling into dependence on not necessarily their own ideological and party interests. However, as Polish examples show, millions of parents – the dream voters for political parties – is treated as a pawn in political games. In recent years in Poland, we have experienced, among other things, a wave of actions for subsequent referendums, which ultimately turned out to be litmus paper allowing for the prediction of the distribution of political forces rather than leading to decisions that would change the reality in accordance with parental postulates. One of these actions, before the presidential and later parliamentary elections in 2015, related to the proposed act on lowering the age of starting compulsory education. Resistance to this bill consolidated in the activities of the "Ratuj Maluchy" ("Save the Babies") movement, which brought together several hundred thousands of parents who opposed the then ruling Civic Platform and Polish People's Party coalition who proposed the bill, and they quickly gained support from the Law and Justice party, then in opposition. The campaign did not stop the decision to lower the age of starting school obligation for children. In 2017, in opposition to the Law and Justice party which gained power at that time, nearly one million parents signed the petition proposed by the Polish Teachers' Union about the referendum on stopping the education reform announced by the government, introducing, among other things, returning to the age of seven as the threshold of compulsory

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[2] I developed these issues in the book (Mendel 2017).

schooling, a new school system eliminating junior high schools, etc. The referendum did not take place and the reform was implemented.

Parents, possessing and occasionally displaying enormous energy in consolidating their efforts, are – as can be seen not only from these examples -- an important political force. This strength is also in the power of their decisions regarding places of fulfilment of the school obligation, i.e. decisions indicating the bank account which will be supplied with a portion of public funds provided for the constitutionally guaranteed education. For example, in the US, parents trample the paths to schools referred to as "charters" and increasing the number of students of this type of school year after year, in fact, are developing the socially unfavourable phenomenon of chartering, leading to the "end of public school" (Buras 2015; Giroux 2015; Hirsch 2015; Kulz 2017; Molnar 2005; Ravitch 2013). This diversification of education in the USA, Great Britain, Poland and many other countries, threatening the development of the idea of public, open and equal education, would not be possible without this parental "voting with their feet".

However, one cannot ignore the fact that parents' decisions regarding the choice of school for a child strongly correlate with their socio-economic status and education. The matter is clearly class based and the real choice of school is the privilege of the middle and upper classes (see for example: Vincent, Ball 2006). Parents' decisions in this regard are also determined - as the research by K.L.Buras and P.Lipman say - by race and place of residence, which applies to the gentrified districts of large, global cities (Buras 2015; Lipman 2004; 2010; 2011). Therefore, this sphere is not so much an area of parental freedom and subjective agency, but rather a sphere of economic and social dependence and the manifestation of the lack of social justice and equality. In this light, parents' political strength seems to be distracted and wasted.

The goal that could engage and integrate it can be stated as achieving democratic commonality. As numerous examples show, parents struggling for universal, equal access and socially just education, are in fact struggling for commonality and -- which is significant – for being the mentioned force that plays a key role in it. This fight consists mainly of parent engagement, of initiatives and the practice of equal participation in creating and using the social good which is public education. This very struggle becomes the testing ground for these desired practices, and is at the same time a form of resistance against privatization and liquidation of schools, accumulation by dispossession, depriving city dwellers of their neighbouring communities, racist capitalism, etc. Parents can be successful in this activism. One example is the Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools (AROS)[3]. AROS is an unprecedented alliance of parent, youth, community and labor organizations that together represent over 7 million people. They are fighting to reclaim the promise of public education which is understood as a gateway to strong democracy.

The texts collected in the volume speak about the results of research and studies on parent engagement as power. By following the agenda presented in this introduction, they support the thesis about the political nature of this power. What "parents do in education" and – as a consequence – what "their" researchers do, is political in the sense not so much of political power (politics), as in that of educational, civic fulfilment of the space of mutual relations; as creating public space (*polis*), or commonality.

For some reasons, we can speak of a community that goes far beyond locality. In the volume, researchers speak of issues, through which we see the perspectives and experiences from different corners of the world (Canada, China, Greece, Italy, Poland, Taiwan). In this way, the studies contained in this volume become a kind of intersectional studies that show parent engagement as power in many various dimensions.

The volume's first article by Marta Wiatr presents – as its title says - the ambiguous meanings of parental engagement in the reflexive modernization era. Wiatr writes about her exploratory qualitative research which was aimed to explore the essence and basis of the phenomenon of "exceptional parental activity". She was interested in the parents' actions themselves and the meanings given to these actions by parents, as well as by wider ideologies in

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[3] http://www.reclaimourschools.org/ (10-02-2020)

which parental activities find their justification. What is puzzling in connection with the progressing diversification (in part - privatization) of public education in Poland, the author conducted her research among parents involved in the life of the school which in a formal and legal sense is not a school (the author calls this type of school "quasi-schools"). Parents create quasi-schools, not only by diversifying the educational system in this way, but also - as the research of Marta Wiatr shows - they shape new, valuable solutions in the field of organization of education and civic activity.

Paola Dusi asks in her research about the current, post-modern condition through the prism of the crises experienced today, including humanitarian crisis, crisis of democracy, etc. When Western societies experiencing a phase of socio-anthropological upheaval, is the relationship between schools and families changing, and if so, in what ways? The findings present a mixed picture, with a range of different parent "types" who, in one sense or another, are looking for support to allow them to better fulfil their social and cultural role as a parent.

The next article in the volume, by Przemyslaw Szczygiel, says about "protesting parents" as a significant social and educational phenomenon. He gives the initial analysis of this phenomenon within a wider study on the learning potential of rebellion (there is interesting category described on the empirical basis: "socialization to rebellion"). The analysed narratives show that protesting parents could potentially have played an important role in shaping the involvement of respondents in social and political affairs. You have to agree with the author who finally states that it can be seen as an important citizen education issue.

In Eleni Damianidou's article we find questions regarding parents as students. She examines the potential impact of the conflict between work, family and school on absenteeism from high-school, and the role academic motivation might have for non-traditional students. She interviewed former and current non-traditional high-school students with dropout behaviour and the registered students of a second chance school in Cyprus. Her analyzes indicated that being unable to respond effectively to the complex role of simultaneously being a parent, an employee and a student had resulted to increased absenteeism and dropout. Damianidou writes a lot about the formative significance of the conflict in which education plays a central role (i.e. being a parent, a worker and a student may result in work-family-school conflict but academic motivation may mediate the above relationship, increasing the likelihood of non-traditional students graduating from high-school).

Rollande Deslandes, Sylvie Barma and France Beaumier present one of the new ways of parental involvement in literacy *via* a new reading method (*La Planète des Alphas*). They conducted a research intervention employing the Cultural-Historical Activity Theory and the Change Laboratory methodology. They describe how teachers question their own practices and interact with parents to give help and to put forward new models of pedagogical actions. For example, they excellently grasped the evolution of the discursive manifestations of transformative agency during the Change Laboratory sessions and the discussion topics they were related to. As the authors stated, the relevance of this intervention and research process can be well extended to the overall field of language construction and the overall literature on family-school relationships.

Six authors – Hsiu-Zu Ho, Rong Yang, Yeana W. Lam, Yin Yu, Hui-Ju Pai, & Sookyung Yeon – focused their research on the issue of parenting role beliefs. Their study investigated them from multiple perspectives—those of students, as well as their parents. We learn from the results of these studies that parenting role beliefs did not significantly differ between fathers and mothers, nor between young male and female students. What is interesting in light of the subject of this volume, parental influence, as perceived by students, was positively correlated with students' own parental role beliefs, such that the more children felt their parents played an important role in their parental role beliefs, the more egalitarian their beliefs. It is very promising.

Dimitra Eleftheriadou and Anastasia Vlachou analysed the problems of social inclusion from a perspective of observed depersonalization, reification of the role(s)/identities of teachers and parents of students with learning disabilities. In the framework of theory of Communities of Practice they examine parent/teacher perception of their role identities in the education of children with learning disabilities. The findings show that the educational and affective support of

the student with learning disabilities was the prevalent feature of parent and teacher identity and although both parents and teachers were engaged in in-school activities, there was no mutual engagement in other practices. The authors conclude by promoting inclusive, collaborative parent-teacher relations, which really shape commonality, and this, as Pierre Rosanvallon argues, conditions democracy as social practice (Rosanvallon 2013).

The next authors, Yin Yu and Hsiu-Zu Ho, present "the influence of Taiwanese parenting style on adolescent mental health and academic performance" in their article. One of the most important research observations made in this text concerns mental health status that leads to negative association with the academic performance of both sons and daughters. The negative relationship between adolescent mental health and academic performance indicates the need to emphasize the impact of excessive academic pressure on Taiwanese adolescent mental health. This must be taken seriously when thinking about the quality of life everywhere, not just in Taiwan

Maria Trzcińska-Król describes cooperation between teachers and parents of foreign students. As part of her research, the author analyzes the growing phenomenon of lack of communication between parents of foreign students and schools. She raises important issues, such as "how does communication with parents of foreign students work?". I would like to say: how does it work for democratic commonality? And although the study presented is only a pilot one, the author answers this question, especially when she develops the thought of social inclusion.

The volume contains 9 articles, each of which, as I mentioned, co-creates a type of intersectional study on parent engagement which is and can be power, and parents its force. It is a kind of hologram, in which each part somehow represents the whole.

Have a good read!

Maria Mendel

Acknowledgements and Credits

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