

In the plot of school autonomy, the organisational mediation*

Elisabete Ferreira**

Abstract

Neste trabalho são apresentados os resultados de uma investigação Portuguesa sobre o desenvolvimento da construção social da autonomia, enfatizando ainda, dentro de um contexto de interdependências e intersubjetividades, o papel central da ação humana comprometida com as questões da mediação organizacional e entendida como a participação, o envolvimento e a responsabilidade compartilhada de todas as pessoas da comunidade escolar. Isto não é específico para Portugal, mas sim para a generalidade dos contextos educativos Europeus. Esta abordagem interacionista permite compreender o trabalho da mediação organizacional como tradução e reinterpretação desenvolvida em compromisso. Uma cultura forte e cooperativa baseada na partilha de tradições, crenças e valores juntamente com a flexibilidade e inovação é apresentada para lidar com a incerteza constante, a ambiguidade e o inesperado. A ação humana exige um conhecimento informado, força de vontade, liberdade e responsabilidade, resultando no desenvolvimento de um ser que tem força de vontade, que é capaz de pensar e criar, agir, refletir e escolher (em um apelo para a autoria do *self*) a fim de desenvolver mais autonomias criativas com um maior grau de solidariedade do trabalho para a comunidade.

Palavras-chave: Autonomia escolar, mediação organizacional, ação humana.

Abstract

In this paper, the results of a Portuguese research on the development of the social construction of autonomy are presented in their specificity, yet emphasising, within a context of interdependencies and intersubjectivities, the central role of human agency, committed to issues of organisational mediation and understood as participation, involvement and shared accountability of all persons acting in a school organisation. This is not specific to Portugal, but rather a common generality in European educational contexts.

These interactionist approaches allow understanding the work of organisational mediation as a translation and reinterpretation developed in compromise. In organisational mediation, relational and communicational approaches, the ethics of affection and of relation, and the

*. This text brings together the development and results of school autonomy achieved through our research studies in educational administration in Portugal since 1998, until the recent European developments. Therefore, there is also a partial exposition of, among others, the ideas of the author's PhD. thesis on the genesis of school autonomy in Portugal and of the presentation of a communication in the Congress AMSE 2008 in Morocco, The Globalization and Education for a Knowledge Society. Emphasis is put on the author's continuity and relevance of the research and ongoing studies on issues related to educational administration, decision making and autonomous school leaderships.

** . FPCE-Universidade do Porto

organisational and communicational acting of autonomous human agency are articulated. A strong and cooperative culture based on the sharing of traditions, beliefs and values is presented, together with flexibility and innovation to deal with the constant uncertainty, ambiguity and the unexpected.

As defined, human agency requires informed knowledge, willpower, freedom and responsibility, resulting in the development of a being who has willpower, is able to think and create, act, reflect and choose (in an appeal to the authorship of the self) in order to develop more creative autonomies with a higher degree of solidarity working for the community.

Keywords: School autonomy, organizational mediation, human agency.

1. Conceptual framework

1.1. Autonomy and Modernity as a time of paradigmatic recombination

Assuming a position of alliance with a critical view of modernity, and witnessing the loss of the meta-narratives, the fragmentation and the plurality of modernity towards an opening to new achievements in society must be assumed. This allows considering delayed modernity (Giddens 1996) not only as a time of paradigmatic transition (Ibid.), but also as a time of paradigmatic re-composition or recombination (Ferreira 2007). This latter point of view allows asserting the necessity of training human beings aiming at humanising human relations in order to deal with the tension and the potential threats of worsen and dehumanized capitalism, transforming it easily into pleasant challenges of people humanisation and development.

In social sciences, there is presently the witnessing of the (re)affirmation of the analysis of human communication and subjectivity, and the starting ideas may then be expressed in the sense of the influence and articulation of personal life contexts with the varied social contexts of those people, namely professionals and politicians, as well as the idea that whichever the personal problems may be, and above all the dimension that is attributed to them, they are not directly drawn from the situations, but rather from the perception that is created by the people involved. In this perspective, the way out of any impasse requires a mediating translation and consists of the possibility of a new framing or re-interpretation of the situation, that is, to change and to extend the field of vision contemplating, thus, different perspectives and new data.

According to the School of Frankfurt, and as mentioned by Giroux (1986, 36), the critical theory “becomes a transforming activity that sees itself as explicitly political and that engages in the projection of a future that has not yet come about”; the issue is, therefore, about seeking and fighting for a better and more human world without injustices.

Sennett (2001, 47) reminds us that “The conditions of time in the new capitalism have created a conflict between character and experience, the experience of disconnected time is threatening the capacity of people to form their respective character as sustained narrative”. As the author states, the world has never experienced stability and people have become accustomed to various improvised ways of survival, but “What is particular about the today’s uncertainty is that it exists without any imminent historical disaster; instead,

it is woven into the daily fabric of a vigorous capitalism.” (*Ibid.*). In this perspective, Sennett’s warnings are also useful to us: “short term capitalism threatens to corrode character, particularly the qualities of character that bond human beings together and confer a sensation of a sustainable ‘I’ in each one of us” (Sennet 2001, 41).

In line with this, a new and deeper knowledge is advocated that raises the interest and the desire to construct of a more autonomous and fair society, and a more satisfying one for people and their communities and cultures, which, collectively and in cooperation, are capable of reclaiming and restoring society. This is a difficult but not impossible task. However, contemporary society should be alert to other perspectives, while there is hope, of warnings or signs as well as possible and desirable paths.

Maffesoli (1998) advocates an open rationality, of sensitive experience, designated by the author as a sensitive reason of passions (erotic). In the explanation and understanding of complex social phenomena, he alerts to the fact that “this gradual surrendering of ‘erotic’ thought, that is, of a loving attitude towards life in its entirety, tends to favour a normative and justifying attitude” (*Ibid.*, 44). In this context, the author appeals to the synergetic expression of the reason and of the sensitive, because “the affection, the emotional and the affective, which are associated with passion, are no longer confined to a separate domain, or simply confined in the sphere of the private life” (*Ibid.*, 53); therefore, only a rationality that has “a sort of enthusiasm” (*Ibid.*) is capable of explaining the totality of social and human phenomena. In this emotional rationality enthusiasm assumes a relevance of commitment in people and which goes against the anomie of behaviours, thus emerging the possibility of organizational mediation.

As far as the crisis in schools is concerned, its pedagogical direction, its specific nature, relational, communicational and organisational is vouched for; however, in terms of order and bureaucracy, this is what hinders a democratic and democratising government and limits autonomy, understood these days as freedom, authority and independence, and closely linked to democracy and change.

In what concerns the crisis (Ribeiro 2006), many people do not identify themselves in these changes in terms of mentalities occurring in the educational arena; however, nobody can remain indifferent to them. What remains to be known is the extent to which education is a victim of this situation of consecutive changes or one of its major responsible, because whenever change occurred, education was present. Consequently, and given the current context of crisis, Portuguese teachers feel threatened and confused, losing the enthusiasm which is critical for the relational dynamics required by education, and which praises the status and the social role of the teacher as a professional of cared relations and of human interaction.

Nóvoa claims that “educational realities are paradoxical and often contradictory. All the theoretical efforts made to try to understand them have to get away from explicatory linearity and to reflect on the complexity of the positions in confrontation” (Nóvoa et al. 1995, 10). In this perspective, the importance of the study of schools as communicational and relational spaces – that is, social ones – contains unique levels of specificity that allows not reflecting exclusively upon school the developing society, but rather a given interaction that mirrors diverse autonomies. In fact, informed knowledge about autonomy and school management in Portugal and abroad seems to be vital in order to take political decisions and carry out strategic actions in the matter of school governance.

1.2. School Autonomy

Following the aforesaid line of reason, and with regard to autonomy, Giroux (1986, 139) states that “theories of resistance deepen our understanding of relative autonomy” which, in turn, increases the frequency of contradictions. In this sense, he asserts “the role attributed to human action and to experience as central mediating links between the structuring determinatives and the lived effects.”

From the results of the Portuguese research¹ on the development of the social construction of autonomy and of school autonomy, and within the scope of the present (and ongoing) research (Ferreira 2004, 2007, 2010), there is also the evidence of a context of politics and of interdependences and inter-subjectivities, of organized collective action, where *human agency*, understood in the participation, the involvement and the co-responsibility of all the people who take part in school or in any other type of organization, assumes a central role, both promised and committed to and in questions of organisational mediation. On the one hand, *human agency* understood in the participation, involvement and shared responsibility of all persons acting in a school or other organization; on the other hand, the organizational mediation herewith referred to as understanding of the ethical dilemmas in organizations.

Still on the subject of the discourses about autonomy, it is worth stressing that any project of autonomy requires a subject who is autonomy originator and, in as far as school autonomy is concerned, there has to be a daily group in the school enthusiastic enough to change the school everyday life, that is, the life of schools.

It is important to note that any analysis or balance on autonomy has to be temporary and unfinished. The present paper approaches the study and the set of hypotheses of autonomous possibility drawn up in the educational field for the government of the school, when the author sought to understand the genesis of the construction of school autonomy and its implementation in the governance of the public high school system deriving from the regulating proposal of the autonomous regime, administration and management of the public establishments of pre-school education and of basic and secondary education, including respective associated schools (Ferreira 2007).

At the beginning of school autonomy, the crisis was witnessed in its double meaning of risk and opportunity for change. In the study of the concept of school autonomy, it became clear that this is a relational and plural concept; in pursuing more autonomy, the school becomes emancipated and resists domination and its deep-rooted bureaucratic adaptation, which is the most common reality in schools. Thus, the basis consists of studies of autonomy, understood as the process and experience of political life intimately linked to the democratization of democracy. In closing, there is also the concept, two possibilities, one of regulatory and the other emancipatory mainstay.

1. As we have stressed, such results on the movement of autonomous schools is not exclusive from Portugal. In European terms, school autonomy paradoxically follows the trinomial quality, assessment and school effectiveness, aiming at the improvement of the results and school and social welfare, highlighting, hence, the relational co-responsibility in the issues of school autonomy in Europe. Emphasis should be put on the essential contribution of some Portuguese authors who, through their work - research, articles, advice, monitoring and evaluation -, have brought new knowledge and analyses on school autonomy and from which the following ought to be referred: Licínio Lima, José Alberto Correia, João Barroso, João Formosinho, Carlos Estêvão, Sousa Fernandes (among many others).

2. Methodology

Our methodological approach consists essentially of a qualitative option in which, in some aspects, quantitative techniques, juxtaposed with an interpretive paradigm, are used. In this heuristic form, we give preference, in this research, to the contact with the subjects, instead of the previous goal of answering certain questions of a hypothetical nature, that is, the purpose is not to confirm hypotheses, but rather to build a grounded theory emerging from data analysis. Through the search for details and experiences in school context, comprehensive goals of social dynamics were drawn up, which, in turn, “allows subjects to respond according to their personal perspective, instead of having to shape to previously prepared questions” (Bogdan and Biklen 1994, 17).

In this article, we use part of the data collected in the genesis of school autonomy in Portugal, namely through questionnaire surveys to students and teachers, and data from analysis of interview guides, performed either to students or to teachers, gathered either individually or in focus groups. With the purpose of mobilizing a wide array of information in different administrative moments, we used also data collected through interviews to school leaders, as well as document analysis of various reports and European and national studies, in order to better understand different approaches to school autonomy. As to the analysis procedures, we used the Excel program for treatment of the questionnaires and construction of figures, tables and graphs; for the documents and interviews, content analysis was carried out. In this text, and from the large amount of materials collected, we mobilized the ones with largest impact, with the aim of understanding the composite and paradoxical genesis and development of autonomy in the European context, interpreted through the two fundamental powers: the regulation and the emancipation ones.

3. Discussion and analysis of results

Through these two powers, that is, the emancipatory and the regulator ones, it is possible to present and discuss the following results, both on school autonomy and on the organizational mediation.

Moreover, the context of school autonomy and the deepening of the development of autonomy tend to show evidence of tension and even of co-existence, within the same educative actor, of the regulatory mainstay (that shows signs of predetermined policies and orientations under the control of the State or the market and, thus, demands conformity to the rules) and of the emancipating mainstay (that prioritizes policies and orientations of freedom, independence, equality and critical thought).

In the impasses and conflicting visions of autonomy, and in this perspective, a typology of autonomy has been constructed: the rehashed autonomy, the quasi-autonomy, the round autonomy, the crisis autonomy and the wise autonomy, thus acknowledging the dynamic and plural possibility of autonomies and their co-existence. In short, the diagram represented in Figure 1 presents: the rehashed autonomy, which is constructed in a rationalism of a conservative and traditional logic, that is, in a functionalist rationality; the quasi-autonomy, which is developed in a neo-liberal logic of competitive market for education and, therefore, showing evidence of a strategic rationality; the round autonomy, which is structured according to the norm and to the legal procedure of authoritarian

power and regulating logic, in a bureaucratic rationality; the crisis autonomy, which can reflect the concurrence of the previous autonomies, as well as its existence *per se*, and even, the reading of the genesis of autonomy and its implementation as crisis autonomy in which regulating and emancipating powers are reflected, in a political and instrumental rationality, most of the time confused and paradoxical and even of entropy, and also functioning consequently as a trigger for other radical possibilities. And finally, the wise autonomy is, thus, renewed and creative, highlights human interactions in their reasons and emotions, hence, brings the centrality of a human agency of “a wise reason of passions”, which, according to Maffesoli (2003), requires a rationality of enthusiasm and ethics, of wanting. Thus, the wise autonomy expresses critically in a logic of emotional rationality that both is and stands for a communicative and emancipatory rationality.

All this autonomous dynamic is mediated by a set of demanding actions, and synthesized with multi-referential relations in the following ideas: in a human agency – capable, critical, with a questioning and creative will –, in an ethics of affect and of human relations and with informed knowledge, taking place in dialogues of autonomies, in a communicative organisation that demands an engaged educative policy with the local people and communities, in an appropriate and on-going way, for the commitment to the deepening of autonomy.

Accordingly, and as shown in Figure 1, the aim is, then, to present the diverse proposals of autonomy (identified in the empirical work), characterizing them by concepts or keywords and highlighting the possibilities of interconnection or of isolated action and necessarily mediated by a set of vectors essential to the human agency and to the political, organisational, communicational contexts, so that in the schools autonomous dialogues and rigorous knowledge may prevail. Thus, the intention follows to underline the possibility, composite and contradictory, potentially inherent to the exercise, to the practice and the deepening of school autonomies.

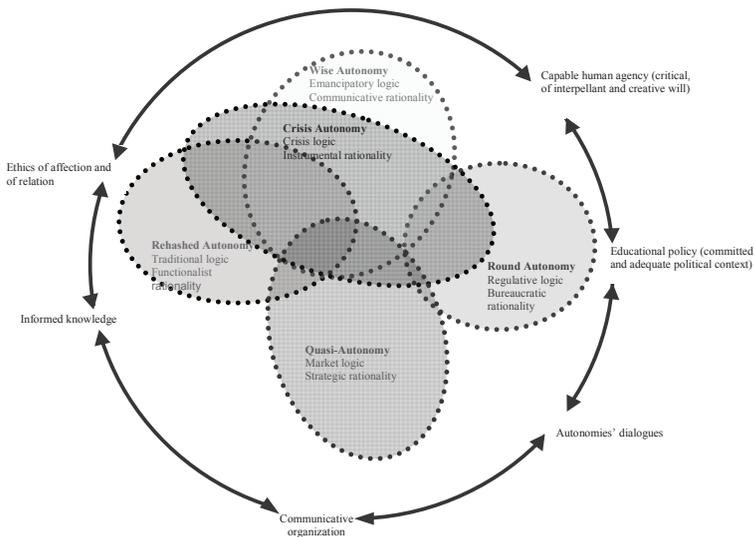


Figure 1: Dynamic construction of school autonomies

Therefore, this effort definition emphasizes fresh possibilities which can point either towards the conceptualization of organizational mediation, or towards its presentation while discussing results. Moreover, and from our point of view, the dynamic articulation of school autonomy is made in its demand and the emergence of organizational mediation.

This whole autonomous dynamic is mediated by a set of actions and of demanding relations, summarized and multi-referenced in the following ideas: in a human agency, that is, in a group of people who, in their interactions, are capable, critical and owners of creative and interpellant will, these dialogues of autonomy are experienced within an ethics of affection and of the relation, and within an informed knowledge, in a communicative organization which claims for an education policy committed to the people and to local communities, in an appropriate and continuing way, so that the commitment to deepen autonomy may be a reality.

Consistent with this autonomous dynamic, people both act and do things according to a given culture shared by beliefs, ideologies and certainties, which are more or less consensual and generic, as well as being creative and innovative of meanings, when they attribute new meanings and interpretative and inter-subjective readings of the world, being autonomous authors in the school microcosms.

It is a question, then, of accepting the tension of dialogical tension which permanently maintains “the contradictory complementarity” (Correia 1998, 183) and the participative involvement of a *human agency* which is critical for the development and deepening of autonomies, requiring occasionally organisational mediation.

Additionally, Giroux (1986, 158) captures this notion and advocates, for a transforming practice, the “civic courage”, considering it central and representative of “a form of behaviour in which the person thinks and acts as if he/she lived in a real democracy. It is a form of bravery that aims at destroying idols, myths and preconceptions”.

In this perspective, it is the responsibility of the organising mediators, of the schools’ human agency, to take full advantage of “the contamination” that most suits them in the situation in cause, devoting themselves collectively to an educative project that demands approval and appropriate political commitment for service to the local community.

This work was not intended to be just “a sociology of denunciation” (Correia 1998, 109); it is, rather, an opportunity for other demanding autonomies, of listening (and wise). The objective of this study was to claim for the wise autonomy a communicational and active role of human action recombined in a composite logic of actions: wise (Hameline 1995), communicational (Habermas 1987), dialogic (Freire 1997) and critical (Giroux 1986) that should follow logics of interpretation, accomplishment and translation, so that slowly, gradually and continuously, the dialogues of autonomies may come to materialize. In other words, the intention is to highlight the emergence, in organizations, of practices of signification and of explanation of the people’s interactions in diverse contexts and with different cultures that require communicative and relational competences for the development of cooperative and sharing processes and which, in that complexity, point towards the need of translation and significance, herewith designated by organisational mediation.

There is, in fact, a strong political reason for the construction of the school autonomy and for the impact that different policies will have at the level of autonomous development to occur in schools by means of a capable human agency which empowers organisational

mediation, understood as a transforming dialogue of relational responsibility towards a construction of an autonomous communicative organization (Ferreira 2007, 2009), that is, accepting the sharing of relational responsibilities generating an ideal of change, of transformation of the existing public school into the desirable one.

The promised organisational mediation in a human agency is also action-reflection-action of the actors, and is developed in a process of becoming tangled up in a plot in which the action takes place in a 'in-between', in a constant effort of doing and undoing (entangled and tied up, at times chaotic) because it deals with risk, danger and confidence on a reflective basis and, hence, it allows mediation, knowledge and it is wise for the actor.

In the perspective hereby advocated, the recognition that this logic may happen through organisational mediation which is engaged with people and in a wise autonomy is due to the belief that it assumes a radical change in the organisational look upon autonomy, which requires school actors to act with courage and "civic courage" (as Jablin 2006, and Giroux 1986, refer).

More specifically, and in which concerns the decision-makers in the government of the autonomous school, attention should be drawn to Jablin (2006), with regard to the development of the studies on leadership and on the defence of transversal knowledge of and in the leadership at the service of common good; the author puts forward the idea of courage, considering it along the lines of "three models: willingness to take risks, awareness, power and fear, at times, elaborated" (Ibid., 102).

Moreover, Giddens (1996) also advocates the need for persons to deal, simultaneously, with risk and confidence, which, in the author's perspective, means an increase of *social reflectivity*, that is, to think constantly and to reflect upon the different perspectives and the circumstances of our daily interactions.

Thus, it becomes possible to think the organisational mediation, established in the desire for the development of ethic and communicative knowledge, based on a practice of other wise(-er) autonomies and that requires a greater investment, commitment, informed and deepen knowledge of autonomy through *an educational policy which is claimed and mediated by the human agency*.

4. Final Remarks

Ongoing research studies and the ways of approaching the issue of school autonomy have been gaining momentum at the transnational level, which accentuates more global and European movements that may be summarized in the public promotion of policies of European education based on the quality of education and efficient management of public funds through the principles and the consecration of autonomous schools.

These perspectives underline the political dimension of education and the visibility of the individual action and of the collective education, and thus defined, the *human agency* requires, on the part of its citizens, informed knowledge, will, freedom and responsibility, resulting in the development of a person with willpower, capable of thinking and creating, acting, reflecting and choosing (in an appeal to the self author), in order to develop more supportive and creative autonomies at the service of the community.

These are times of change and contradictions, in which personal and social life and science look for new relations, which intensify attributed importance, in organizations, to

people and to their dynamics of interaction, to culture, to (micro) powers and to the salient influences in the interdependence of autonomy and of a human agency. This application of creative and innovative approaches allows understanding the work of organisational mediation as a translation and re-interpretation significantly developed and committed to an autonomous human agency. Therefore, the emergence and the need for organizational mediation take place to deal with the paradoxes and the dilemmas of the contemporary society and to the development of a rationality of the knowledge as understanding.

References

- Bogdan, R., & Biklen, S. (1994). *Investigação qualitativa em educação. Uma introdução à teoria e aos métodos* [Qualitative research in education. An introduction to theory and methods]. Porto: Porto Editora.
- Correia, J. A. (1998). *Para uma teoria crítica em educação* [For a critical theory in education]. Porto: Porto Editora.
- Ferreira, E. (2004). A autonomia da escola pública: A lenda da estátua com pés de barro [The autonomy of public schools: The legend of the statue with clay feet]. *Educação, Sociedade & Culturas* 22: 133-152.
- Ferreira, E. (2009). (D)Enunciar as Autonomias na governação da escola pública portuguesa como contributo compreensivo da mediação organizacional [Reporting the autonomies in the governance of Portuguese public school as an understanding contribution of organizational mediation]. In *Tutoria e Mediação em Educação* [Mentoring and Mediation in Education]. ed. Ana Margarida Veiga Simão, Ana Paula Caetano and Isabel Freire, 171-181. Lisboa: Educa.
- Ferreira, E. (2007). (D)enunciar a autonomia – Contributos para a compreensão da génese e da construção da autonomia na escola secundária [Reporting the autonomy – Contributions to understanding the genesis and construction of autonomy in high school] PhD diss. University of Porto, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences.
- Freire, P. (1997). *Pedagogia da autonomia – Saberes necessários à prática educativa* [Pedagogy of Autonomy – usefull knowledge for the teaching practice]. Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra.
- Giddens, A. (1996). *As consequências da modernidade* [The consequences of modernity]. Oeiras: Celta Editora.
- Giroux, H. (1986). *Teoria crítica e resistência em educação* [Theory and resistance in education]. Petrópolis: Vozes.
- Habermas, J. (1987). *Théorie de l'agir communicationnel (I et II)* [Theory of Communicative Action (I and II)]. Paris: Fayard.
- Hameline, D. (1995). O educador e a acção sensata [The educator and the sensible action]. In *Profissão professor* [Profession teacher] António Nóvoa et al., 35-62. Porto: Porto Editora.
- Jablin, F. M. (2006). Courage and courageous communication among leaders and followers in groups, organizations, and communities. *Management Communication Quarterly* 20, 1: 94-110.
- Maffesoli, M. (1998). *Elogio da razão sensível* [Praise of sensible reason]. Petrópolis: Editora Vozes.
- Maffesoli, M. (2003). *Entre o bem e o mal. Compêndio de subversão pós-moderna* [Between good and evil. Compendium of postmodern subversion]. Lisboa: Instituto Piaget.
- Nóvoa, A., Hameline, D., Sacristán, J. G., Esteve, J. M., Woods, P., and Cavaco, M. H. (1995). *Profissão professor* [Profession teacher]. Porto: Porto Editora.
- Ribeiro, A. (2006). December. *Professores na escola de hoje: Do difícil equilíbrio entre desafios e perícia* [Teachers in today's schools: The difficult balance between challenges and skill]. Closing Conference of the II Colóquio DCE-UMA and VII Colóquio Internacional da Sociedade Europeia de Etnografia na Educação (SEEE) “Educação e Cultura”. Funchal, Madeira, Portugal.

Sennett, R. (2001). *A corrosão do carácter – As consequências pessoais do trabalho no novo capitalismo* [The corrosion of character – the personal consequences of work in the new capitalism]. Lisboa: Terramar.