



What is left? Bracketing the role of school

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INTRODUCTION

*T*his special issue is being published at a time when the conflict between technological optimists in education, empowered by the pedagogical experiments of the pandemic, and traditionalists, disgusted by the low effectiveness of distance education and hailing a return to the traditional school bench, has been rekindled. In the field of educational theory and research, there has been a resurgence of interest in critical and traditional conceptualisations of schooling. Prominent among these re-emerging themes are Illich's radical propositions concerning deschooling (Bartlett & Schugrensky, 2020), less radical notions of schooling at home (Price, Peersman, & Matherne, 2021), and conventional approaches that emphasise the advantages of re-engaging with formal school education (Asadullah, 2024).

In the sense of a committed approach to addressing current issues in pedagogy, the call for papers for this issue was also biased – “In favour of the school”. The headline was meant to provoke, to arouse discussion. Fox and Stronach (1986) have already shown that in the case of the work of critical educators

Educational researchers using naturalistic enquiry are leaving their readers surprisingly attached to the researcher's authority. Surprising, because many refer to their aim to free. ... their intellectual authority remains unquestioned within their research. (p. 149)



Fox and Stronach (1986) therefore propose a process of “bracketing”, which they borrow from mathematics, meaning providing a “depth of analysis to the intentional side of the research, to its own questioning procedures. Why was the question asked?” (p. 144). It is evident that the personal motivation and authority of the researcher are significant factors in the analysis. In this context, factors such as a sense of threat may already play an important role. It is pertinent to consider whether some researchers perceive the school as being under threat, or whether they feel that the institution is obsolete. It is crucial to examine whether their attitude influences the setting of the research, the research design, or the interpretation of the data.

The concept of “bracketing” draws its origins from the field of phenomenology and its reflexive setting. It has gained significant prominence within the domain of qualitative research methodology (Tufford & Newman, 2012). Gearing (2004) explains bracketing as a “scientific process in which a researcher suspends or holds in abeyance his or her presuppositions, biases, assumptions, theories, or previous experiences to see and describe the phenomenon” (p. 1430).

The authors of the papers in this special issue do not adopt this approach. Instead, their contributions are characterised by strong individual authorship, representing a continuation of their professional identity and research. They offer a defence of the school (Rochex) and a critique of the school (Ekenberg; Klapáľková et al.), demonstrating a high level of engagement. The “bracketing”, as it is employed here, does not emerge from the authors’ reflections; rather, it originates from the editorial perspective, characterised by the attenuation of the authority of authorship and an examination of the discourse that surrounds, constitutes, and is inextricably linked to the school. I take a Foucaultian approach to the texts, “dealing with the ‘author’ as a function of discourse” and considering “the characteristics of a discourse that support this use and determine its difference from other discourses” (Foucault, 1979, pp. 19–20).

In the contemporary context, characterised by the pervasive influence of artificial intelligence and the shift in focus from authorship to discourse and its interconnections, Foucault’s words resonate with renewed clarity (1979, pp. 28–29):

Discourses, whatever their status, form, or value, and regardless of our manner of handling them, would unfold in a pervasive anonymity. No longer the tiresome repetitions: “Who is the real author?” “Have we proof of his authenticity and originality?” “What has he revealed of his most profound self in his language?” New questions will be heard: “What are the modes of existence of this discourse?” “Where does it come from; how is it circulated; who controls it?” “What placements are determined for possible subjects?” “Who can fulfil these diverse functions of the subject?” Behind all these questions we would hear little more than the murmur of indifference: “What matter who’s speaking?”



In this “murmur”, the school emerges as an object of thematisation and perhaps even a subject, if it manages to break out of the stranglehold of AI (Ekenberg in this issue).

THE ARK

In Ekenberg’s article, school is discussed in the context of the AI threat. However, the author does not seem to be looking for arguments to save the school and the traditional, but rather to explore the possibilities and limitations of the school structure. He lends his authorial voice to Socrates and Phaedrus, pointing to the dispute over the meaning of writing as analogous to the contemporary dispute over the meaning of text production technologies.

The structure of school education is predicated on written culture and exteriorisation; consequently, the threat to it from AI is existential.

Having abdicated from the opportunity to help negotiate a collective description of the world from a distinctly personal point of view (a negotiation accomplished not by averaging, but by any and all other means), I join the choir of an exploding number of identical horns drowning out the remaining variation by issuing one single clean tone. (Ekenberg in this issue)

However, there is another side to school culture that currently goes unnoticed: namely, the oral and relational aspect. Ekenberg presents the Platonic pedagogical ideal, which is defined as cognitivist-oriented pedagogical communication based on the unique communicative, relational, and demanding situation of teacher and student.

The Phaedrus teacher is everything but professional. The teacher is personally attached to, and invested in the fate of, the student. The student is not replaceable, and the message delivered could never be codified and standardised and packaged. A sort of competition is central to this understanding of the educational setting, because in Plato’s world, as in our own, truth and goodness are always under attack, always contested. (Ekenberg in this issue)

The Platonic model does not return to a disciplinary school culture (Foucault, 1977), which is instead prone to succumbing completely to the standardising and imitative rationalities on which AI is built. The Platonic model conceptualises the school as a refuge “in order to keep cultivating a living language capable of being a vehicle for truth and a medium of meaningful interchange in a society of respon-



sible citizens” (Ekenberg in this issue). Ekenberg thus proposes the opposite form of deschooling to the one that AI is currently bringing. It is thus outside the proposals of Illich that gave rise to technological optimism. This is about deschooling within the school structure – changing the culture within the existing structure.

The metaphor of the ark is pivotal to this discussion. While Ekenberg concludes with it, the fundamental premise is that everything begins with it. The proposition of such a paradigm shift within the educational milieu is predicated on the notion of the school as an autonomous experimental space, one that possesses the capacity to operate in a state of rupture “behind the walls of the school”. This is a modernist achievement in its own right, providing educational institutions with the opportunity to respond to external threats and focus on cultivating pupils. Despite the problematic aspects inherent in the metaphor of school as a safe space (Rom, 1998), it is precisely this element that offers the school structure the opportunity to foster hope.

SCHOOL GRAMMAR AND SCHOOL FORM

In this issue, Rochex employs the metaphor of the school as a chosen and protected space, thereby directly answering the question posed in this editorial: “What is left?” Drawing on the work of Tyack, Tobin, and Cuban, he responds that despite contemporary advances and innovations in pedagogy, as well as educational reforms and changes, the “grammar of schooling” remains in place. The “grammar of schooling” is understood as the organisational structure of the school, including its spatio-temporal particularities, which give rise to specific conditions for pedagogical interactions and activities.

This grammar is constituted by the so-called “school form”, a concept formulated by Vincent for the purposes of the analysis of schooling. According to Vincent, the school form consists of specific spatial and temporal characteristics, as well as collectivity and grouping. Furthermore, it encompasses the objectification and de-contextualisation of knowledge, its sequencing, and the reproduction of supra-personal rules.

At its core, the school form aims to embody and bring to life a space-time devoted to the work of learning and studying and to ensure the conditions required for such work to take place – a type of work largely based on written culture and the use of external semiotic systems of representation that aims to construct a secondary relationship to the world, to language, and to the self. (Rochex in this issue)

This secondary relationship appears to be pivotal. In making this argument, the author does not remain neutral, but emphasises the advantages of such an orienta-



tion of schooling over deschooling and school reform efforts. In this context, however, the vulnerability of the school form to the prevailing changes engendered by AI becomes evident. In contradistinction to Ekenberg, who does address this matter as a contributing factor to the process of the de-institutionalisation of schooling in this issue, Rochex does not include this element in his theoretical framework. A fascinating avenue for future research would be to analyse how AI is, or will be, impacting on the grammar and form of the school, particularly in the light of its institutional connection to exteriorisation and written culture.

PROFESSIONALISATION

The school is a social space characterised by a distinct social structure and a clear division of social roles. Teachers are regarded as certified professionals whose primary function is to facilitate the implementation of the state or national curriculum. In this issue, Quiroga Lobos demonstrates the manner in which teacher professionalism is being cultivated in Chile, following an institutional element of professional development known as micro-centres. The school as an organisation is thematised here in the context of the broader network of institutions involved in the administration of education.

Micro-centres are conceptualised as sites for the reproduction of teacher culture, that is to say, self-reproduction. These spaces facilitate the convergence of practising teachers, with the content of their communication elucidating the fundamental issues of school education. It is therefore possible to interpret negotiations within the micro-centres as a response to the threats or new demands facing the school. Therefore, any conflict arising in that negotiation creates a space for demarcating the foundations of school normality that can no longer be transgressed. That is to say, it expresses “what is left”.

The central authority remains as the final remaining element. Micro-centres can be defined as sites of negotiation between local and state school cultures. Each culture is characterised by its own representatives and mediators (teachers, coordinators, and pedagogical technical advisors). The case of Chile is an example of professionalising centralisation that has particularly affected rural schools. The decentralised regional administration has been replaced by 70 local public education services. Examining the dynamics of the aforementioned centres reveals a unifying tendency and a degree of standardisation, which, while not inherently incompatible with local educational objectives, can give rise to local conflicts.

Chile is thus a unique example of school professionalisation. It is distinctive not only in terms of its focus on one country, but also in terms of the distinctiveness of professional socialisation in the school environment. This has resulted in the



establishment of different institutional structures in different countries in order to maintain a standardised school culture.

SCHOOL CULTURE

The question of what constitutes a solid foundation of school culture is convincingly answered by the study of Klapáľková et al. in this issue. Paradoxically, however, the study in question is based on the reality of deschooling, as it analyses the diaries of parents practising homeschooling. These parents have made an ideological choice and are affirmative towards homeschooling; therefore, bracketing must also be performed in relation to their attitudes. An analysis of their discourse about school is necessary, as this does not always operate in a dismissive mode and gives us a glimpse of “what is left”. Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that even within the context of homeschooling, elements of traditional school culture persist in facilitating learning, in the sense of “school at home” (Price, Peersman, & Matherne, 2021).

A number of home-schooling families engage with the concept of “school form”, as articulated by Rochex in this issue. This encompasses not only the acceptance of the established national school curriculum, but also its temporal organisation, time structure, specifically the thematic units, and the method of content planning. Some families even work within the context of school regimes and create learning schedules and plans.

In the cases recorded here, however, it is not a question of seeking continuity between home education and school. On the contrary, there are many rejecting, critical, radical voices in the text that point towards unschooling. This applies, for example, to the rejection of school assessments and grading. But this discourse also shows us, by defining itself against the school, what constitutes its stable structure and the culture against which parents define themselves.

The results show that most families benefit to varying degrees from school-based support, whether in the form of learning materials, curricula, or community schools. Some families adapt to the demands of the school curriculum and work with traditional textbooks, while others try to break out of the formal school structure as much as possible and teach their children through everyday experiences and free play. (Klapáľková et al. in this issue)

From the above quote, it is clear what is at the core of the structure and culture of the school, that is, what is still “left over”.



CONCLUSION

Rochex's paper demonstrates that the "school form" does not emerge spontaneously or abruptly; rather, it is associated with profound socio-economic and historical movements. Pedagogical experimentation, therefore, represents merely its superficial, sedimentary manifestation. The school is not merely an organisation, but rather an institution. It is not isolated from social life; rather, it is a consequence and a constitutive element of social life in modern societies. The structure of schools can be considered a technological consequence and a constituent of the normative structure of society. In this regard, Dreeben's (1968) analysis can offer a valuable perspective on the key features of school culture, as he has summarised them as follows:

In speaking of these four ideas as norms, I mean that individuals accept them as legitimate standards for governing their own conduct in the appropriate situations. Specifically, they accept the obligations to (1) act by themselves (unless collaborative effort is called for), and accept personal responsibility for their conduct and accountability for its consequences; (2) perform tasks actively and master the environment according to certain standards of excellence; and (3) acknowledge the rights of others to treat them as members of categories (4) on the basis of a few discrete characteristics rather than on the full constellation of them that represent the whole person. I treat these four norms because they are integral parts of public and occupational life in industrial societies, or institutional realms adjacent to the school. (pp. 63–64)

It seems that this is what makes a school a school, what is still "left". A whole ideological spectrum of narratives and attitudes revolves around this relic, the whole "murmur of indifference" that Foucault speaks of. Bracketing is a way of not losing one's balance in such a "murmur".

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