

Market trends and the dilemmas of parental participation in schools

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Resumen

Tendencias de mercado y dilemas en la participación de los padres y madres en los centros escolares. El objetivo de este artículo es describir y analizar el impacto de la implementación de un nuevo modelo de gestión de los centros escolares en Portugal (Decreto-Ley N°115-A/1998) que intenta promover patrones de ciudadanía e igualdad en la educación estatal (participación de los padres y madres en los procesos de toma de decisiones, accesos sociales, oportunidades educativas). La institucionalización de este modelo anuncia un cambio en la actual estructura centralista y burocrática de la administración de los centros Portugueses y sugiere la existencia de una “convergencia pragmática” en la evolución política que, desde mediados de los años ochenta, ha dominado la agenda educativa de muchos países occidentales y organismos internacionales (OCDE, Banco Mundial). Los resultados de esta investigación sugieren que la implementación de este nuevo modelo de gestión conduce a nuevos tipos de diferenciación social en las escuelas portuguesas de educación primaria y constituye un elemento importante de resurgimiento del dominio de la clase media tradicional en el campo de la educación.

Abstract

This paper aims to describe and analyse the impact of the defining and implementing of the new management model in Portuguese schools (Decree-Law N°115-A/1998) on patterns of citizenship and equity in Portuguese state education (parent participation in decision-making, social access, educational opportunities). The institutionalisation of this model heralds a change in the bureaucratic and centralist structure of Portuguese school administration and suggests the existence of a “paradigmatic convergence” in relation to the devolution policies that, since the mid-eighties, have dominated the educational agenda of many western countries and international organisms (OCDE, World Bank). The research findings suggest that the implementation of the new management model has led to new kinds of social differentiation in Portuguese primary schools and constitutes an important element in the revival of traditional middle-class ascendancy in the field of education.

Crisis within the State, Globalisation and “New Economy”

Crisis of the State and restructuring of public services

The advocacy of models of school-based management (SBM), currently referred to as “decentralization” or “devolution”, forms part of a wider movement to restructure public services. Various authors attribute this to the “crisis of the State”, which became apparent in the closing decades of the twentieth century. This feeling of crisis was described by Waters (1995) as follows: “states appeared unable to make economies grow, unable to offer transparency and value for money in the exercise of power and unable to ensure a certain future for their populations” (Waters, 1995, p160). In the educational sphere, the problems of the governability of the State were to manifest themselves specifically in an inability to deal with growing social diversity, widespread dissatisfaction with the output of the education system and failure to keep up with the pace of cultural, economic and technological change (Barber, 1996).

This “crisis of the State” has been associated with the impact of globalization on national political systems (Giddens, 1997). This has forced them to give strong political backing to the activities of the market as opposed to regulating its excesses (Blackmore, 1999). The constraints facing national states in this domain are further compounded by difficulties arising from the end of the post-war period of prosperity and by the successive economic crises of recent years. Financial crisis imposes the strategic and organizational redefining of the central administration and public services. Indeed, the bedrock of Keynesism was precisely that it was the State’s responsibility to intervene at whatever level it considered necessary in order to create a fairer society capable of providing a high level of social welfare to all its citizens:

“[State intervention] helped to balance supply and demand without the violent cyclical swings characteristic of competitive markets (...) Promoted economies of scale through nationalization or merger policies, encouraged Fordist mass consumption through its housing and transport policies, and generalised norms of mass consumption through intervention in labour markets and collective bargaining and through its provision for collective consumption.” (Jessop, 1996, p.255)

In the new “global economy”, on the other hand, national states are faced with the need to limit and modify their actions by becoming more “competitive”, in two senses of the term: first, through the precedence they are obliged

to give to the economic aspects of their work; and second, through the cuts they are obliged to make in their own running costs. These constraints have led to a climate favourable to acceptance of a restricted set of basic principles. "These are: fiscal discipline, public expenditure priorities, tax reform, financial liberalization, exchange rates, trade liberalization, foreign direct investment, privatization, *deregulation*, and property rights" (Dale, 1999, p4).

This new orthodoxy also included a trenchant critique of those traditional forms of organisation - professional, bureaucratic and Fordist - which were considered ill suited to the demands of complexity and change in the modern world (Clark, J & Newman, J., 1997). Bureaucratic structures came in for the heaviest criticism, from neo-liberal and neo-managerial perspectives, as being costly, undemocratic and wide open to corporatism, as well as being the inflexible generators of resistance to change and innovation.

"The logical outcome of these policy priorities was increasing pressure to cut back and privatise services provided by the State, the quest for alternatives to direct public provisions (contracting out, partnerships) and the gradual opening up of the public sector to the dictates of the market (competition, cost reduction)" (Ball, 1998, p12).

The pressure for change is particularly noticeable in the field of education, where the emergence of different types of school based management (SBM) has become such a widespread phenomenon that some authors consider it to be a universal trend:

"An international comparative study was undertaken by Caldwell in 1986-1988(...) The common trend in all the developments was the shift of power to make certain kind of decisions from a central authority to a school. In each instance the school continued to work within a framework of legislation, policies and priorities determined by the central authority" (Caldwell & Spinks, 1992, p31).

The new models of school management imply a new kind of relations between "producers" (teachers) and "consumers" (parents), especially in countries where neo-liberal theories are dominant.

The Power of the Consumer

Consumerist theorists argue that there is an imbalance of power between those who provide goods and services, and those for whom they provide.

The former possess all the advantages of corporate power and organisation (Potter, 1994, 250 cit in Clark and Newman, p108).

Adoption of the rules of the market implies, therefore, in the first place, subjecting public services to the primacy of the consumer or recreation of surrogate consumer producer relationship. The pursuit of this objective is not limited, however, from a neo-managerial perspective, to adopting traditional strategies of consumer participation or representation.

“The good news of the excellent companies is the extent to which, and the intensity with which, the customers intrude into every nook and cranny of the business - sales, manufacturing, research, accounting” (Peter & Waterman, 1995, p157).

In a similar way, better-off families modify and extend their intervention, creating a type of relationship with the school that some authors have described as “professional parenting” (Vincent, 1996, 2000). Parents become “active consumers in the market place”, “monitor and closely police what schools provide”, “transmit appropriate forms of cultural capital” and “exploit the educational system to their children’s best advantage” (Gewirtz, 2001, p 367).

In cases where more “advanced” market mechanisms are adopted - choice, vouchers- institutional participation and political influence become largely meaningless. Indeed, from a market perspective and from the point of view of the individual consumer, exit is an infinitely more “efficient” strategy than voice. Why waste time making demands when you can simply change “brand” (school) or “supplier”?

The supremacy of the consumer also helps to make the distinction between public and private largely meaningless: the organisational autonomy granted to schools makes it possible for local interests (particular) to prevail over public principles (general); mechanisms are put in place for “competition” or for interconnecting the public and the private sectors (incentive for school/company partnerships; contracting out of certain services); the freedom of the consumer is extended to institutions outside the “public service” (voucher system).

Political confidence in the “opening up to the community” and the blurring of the frontiers between the public and private sectors is not surprising if we bear in mind the political benefits derived from a redefining of the relations between State and citizens in which the latter are essentially perceived as individual consumers or restricted decision-makers. The influence of

these individual consumers or “*atomised*” and “*localised*” citizens may be contained within the limited sphere of each organisation and easily exercised within the framework of policies defined at a higher level. It can also be used to curb the professional autonomy of teachers who become exposed to more individualized and immediate pressure from parents (Van Zanten, 1996, Silva, 2003).

Although the “institutional freedom” won by the central administration in this process, as well as the advantages accrued in the political arena (participatory discourse, effects on state “legitimisation” and accountability) should not be underestimated, the main consequences associated with the institutionalisation of consumer power would seem to be of a social nature. Indeed, in spite of the purported neutrality and universality associated with the workings of the market, there is nothing natural, neutral or universal about the “marketisation” of education:

“The market form valorises certain types of cultural and social capital which are unevenly distributed across the population. The use of these capitals in choice-making and choice-getting enables certain social groups to maintain or change their position in the social structure” (Ball, 2003, p6).

Indeed, differences have been recorded between the middle and the working classes, both in the extent to which they exercise school choice, and in the procedural sphere implied by the new system:

“To decode school systems and organisations, to discriminate between schools in terms of policies and practices, to engage with and question (and challenge if necessary) teachers and school managers, to critically evaluate teachers’ responses and to collect, scan and interpret various sources of information” (Gewirtz, Ball, Bowe, 1995, p25).

This is why the marketisation of education should also be interpreted as part of a wider process of reorganisation of the relations between the different social groups at a time of great uncertainty for the middle classes (Afonso, 2000). This uncertainty stems from the convergence of various factors: the end of the “monopoly” on access to higher education; loss of job security due to frequent professional and organisational restructuring; changes in contractual procedures (performance-related pay, fixed-term contracts, individual or organisational); increased competition in the market place due to globalisation, joblessness of well-qualified professionals, new professional patterns).

In this “high risk” scenario, differentiation in the educational system - generated by the various forms of SBM, the development of public-private ownership and the systems of choice- may be an important instrument in the renovation of middle class traditional advantages in the educational field.

The research study carried out in six Portuguese primary schools, as we will see, provide evidence that supports this hypothesis. In order to facilitate an understanding of the research findings, we shall now give a brief summary of the methodological procedures adopted.

Methodology

Any research procedure involves a wide variety of epistemological, ontological, methodological and procedural options (Silva, 2001). This study takes its main inspiration from the field of critical theory and critical ethnography and, within this field, from those studies that sought to analyse the impact of devolution policies on school settings (Apple, 2001; Arnott & Raab, 2000; Ball & Van Zanten, 1998; Whitty, 2002).

Opting for the ethnographic method does not, however, derive exclusively from the epistemological and theoretical premises underlying the study. It derives, to a great extent, from the very objectives of the research. Indeed, it would be difficult either to embark upon an analysis of the impact of devolution policies on Portuguese primary schools, without having recourse to observation “of the everyday routines that make organizational life” (Schwartzman, 1993, p38).

Field work was carried out in six primary schools of the Lisbon area, of different size, location and social composition of population (see table 1).

Table 1. *Description of the Sample*

School features /Schools	N° of students	Social background	Location of the school
Main school	386	Upper middle class	Limit of the city
Pessoa school	321	Middle / Upper middle Class	Central
Park school	270	Mixed (129 underprivileged)	Limit of the city
Magalhães school	42	Mixed	Limit of the city
Gama school	356	Lower classes	Central
Avenue school	48	Lower classes	Central

The research process included two main phases. In the first part of the study, prior to the implementation of the new management model, the research process focused on existent models of parental/community involvement and participation. Such a description aimed to establish a trustworthy base of comparative references for subsequent study. The fieldwork, lasting one year, was carried out between 1998 and 1999, given that the transition to the new management model was only begun in the academic year 1999/2000.

In the second phase of the research, an attempt was made to identify the transformations taking place in Portuguese primary schools, on the cultural, organisational, pedagogic and political levels, as a result of the adoption of a new regime of “autonomy, administration and management of Portuguese schools” (Decree-Law N° 115 _A/98).

In order to achieve these aims, weekly or fortnightly visits to the participating schools were made and a large number of interviews (128) and observations of the meetings held by the various managerial bodies (72) were also conducted. The fieldwork relating to this phase of the research was considerably more protracted than in the preceding phase, being carried out over a period of around three years in most of the schools in the sample and almost four years at Main School (the first in the study to make the transition to the new management model). The decision to prolong the period in the field was made in order to guarantee the validity of the data gathered, given the complexity of the social and organisational changes involved. A shorter period of observation could equally as well have led to an underestimation of the changes taking place (change often being a lengthy process) as to overestimation (institutional dynamics tending to favour “incorporation” and “normalization” of innovations). The option for a longitudinal study over 3/4 years and a follow-up phase, currently in progress, seemed to be an appropriate way to guarantee the reliability of the research.

The analysis took into consideration the main issues and controversies which the reform in school governance has raised in recent decades: emergence of new models for social regulation (market, neo-managerialism, performativity); new relations between the school and the community (consumer power, contracting out and privatisation of services); the blurring of the frontiers between the public and private sectors; the impact of devolution policies on the democratisation of schools (in terms of equality of access, achievement and participation).

Results

Parental Involvement in Portuguese Schools prior to the implementation of the School-Based Management Model: a Universe of Contrasts

The formal sanction of the right of the family to participate in primary schools was a slow and cautious process in Portugal. Indeed, it was only in the mid-eighties that the rights of parents' associations set up after the revolution were extended to all levels of education. These rights were increased in 1990, providing fresh opportunities for parental intervention in schools: representation on the Board of Studies, extra-curricular activities, school projects (Silva, 2001).

In spite of these openings, many primary schools, especially the smaller ones or those with a lower-class population, continue today to have no parents' association. Moreover, the present study has revealed that the relationship between primary schools and families is a world of marked contrasts: there are cases in which the families are completely marginalized, while there are others in which the power of the "consumers" is hard to ignore.

The Marginalization of Parents

A case of parental marginalization, as a global institutional feature produced by the breakdown of communication between school and family, was identified in Avenue School. This school was attended entirely by disadvantage children from families whose way of life contrasts sharply with the traditional concepts of family. These differences were deeply felt by the school: "Many pupils are the children of prostitutes, living in rooms in boarding-houses ..." (head teacher). Any relationship between the school and the community was fraught with difficulty: there were no meetings, nor was there any official or unofficial representation of parents. The latter rarely set foot in the school, even on their children's first day of classes. There was no compliance with legal provisions referring to parental participation.

This total lack of communication was attributed to complete disinterest and irresponsibility on the part of the parents: "they don't come to the school, they're not interested in anything, not even in coming to get the reports" (substitute teacher at Avenue School). Even so, certain incidents that occurred during the research - complaints by parents to the police, insults and threats outside the school - showed that in many cases parental disinterest was not as complete as teachers would like. In their own way, though the tea-

chers might not approve, these parents were showing their awareness of the school life of their offspring. However, this did not take the form of pedagogic “supporter”, as idealized by many teachers (Vincent, 1996, 2000); nor did it correspond to the teachers’ idea of the family model (Davies, 1989; Dias, 1999). On the contrary, this intervention only occurred in extreme situations, with the parents defending their children in a manner which the teachers considered inappropriate and which produced fear and aversion.

It was not only fear, however, that moved teachers to keep parents away from the school. Indeed, families were not considered morally fit to bring up their own children (“this is an area of prostitution and drug-addiction”), let alone to collaborate in their schooling. The effort involved in bringing the parents to the school was therefore seen as a thankless task, with undeniably disastrous consequences: “I’m against *autonomy* [the new model of school management]. Can you imagine parents participating in the running of a school like this? If things are this bad already, they could only become a nightmare” (deputy head, Avenue school).

In spite of the cultural arrogance underlying the teachers’ attitudes to the families of their pupils, it is hard to see them, nevertheless, as the all-powerful professionals described in some of the literature advocating choice.

The marginalization of families seemed to be more the result of the impotence of teachers when confronted by a situation with which they felt unable to cope than of an assertion of professional power and authority.

Worlds Apart: Keeping the Frontiers Alive

At Park School there is a far milder version of the separation between school and family detected at Avenue School. The teachers meet the bureaucratic demands concerning information and parental involvement, but relations are far from being close. Indeed, the whole institutional conduct of the school seemed to be geared towards preserving a respectful distance between teachers and parents:

- parents were often “put in their place” (“If you were really concerned about the school, you’d bring a couple of clowns to entertain at the Christmas party. That’s what parents’ associations are for, not just to complain about the teachers”) (ex-head).
- the topics discussed at teachers’ and parents’ meetings (compulsory) were not, as related in numerous interviews, conducive to parental involvement. They generally centred around pupil assessment or, to put it in more “modern” terms, work the pupils had done.

- even at parties, parents and teachers do not socialize. The parents congregate at the far end of the gymnasium, watching their children perform at a distance. No one establishes any kind of contact with them; it is as if they weren't there. (Christmas party).

Parents who tried to “mimic” the behaviour of the middle class were likewise quickly made aware of their impotence. This was well illustrated by one incident during the course of the study. The parents' association tried to set up a structure for Leisure Time Activities (LTA) along middle-class lines (English, music and drama classes). Only eleven parents were interested and of these only six made formal enrolments. The “new” LTA closed down after Christmas for lack of support. The old one, which was much cheaper, continued to operate despite having no extra-curricular activities to offer. These failures demonstrate that the spirit of initiative so widely preached in neo-liberal theories is rarely strong enough to circumvent the social structure. In this case the parents' initiative in attempting to secure for their children a variety of extra-curricular activities was completely defeated by the “lack” of cultural and economic capital among the majority of parents.

Citizens and Consumers

The management of Portuguese schools has often been accused of corporatism. It is alleged that, through an alliance between the State and the professionals, members of the community have been effectively barred from involvement in Portuguese schools. This scenario was far from being absolute: it may be applicable to Park school, but would hardly explain the dynamic relations of the upper- middle -class Main school. Indeed, here the situation was almost diametrically opposed. Teachers' complaints were unanimous and practically endless:

“This is considered a model school, in Lisbon terms. But teachers don't want to come here, for obvious reasons: they don't want problems with the parents” (head teacher, Main School).

“The problem is that they [the parents] always have the upper hand. They're constantly putting the teachers down” (teacher, Main School).

These grievances are far from corresponding to any syndrome to do with the persecution of teachers. In Main School the influence of the “community” is recognized by the parents themselves, the authorities and the directors of the school:

“I have to admit that the parents’ association of this school sticks its nose into everything. The parents are capable of pulling all sorts of strings, with the Centre for Educational Support (CAE), the Regional Education Office (DREL) and the Basic Education Department (DEB), even with the press” (parents’ association).

“The minister’s nephew is a pupil of ours. In fact this community has everything, from ministers to secretaries of state” (head of Main school).

The parents took up all kinds of issues with the teachers and the management.

Their demands began over the actual choice of school for their children:

“The parents invariably come and visit the school before enrolling their children. They want to know what it’s like and how it works: if the teachers are on the permanent staff, if they give the children continuous support, how the classes are organised. They always want to know everything about the school, including details of breaks, school dinners, etc.” (Armanda, deputy head, Main school)

This attitude of the critical consumer, who shops around before buying, shows that nowadays middle-class parents set about their choice of state school in much the same way as they would choose a private school. In fact many of them have, or had, their children in this sub-system.

The importance given to school choice represents, however, only part of a deeper change in parenthood:

“Parental responsibilities multiply as parenting and family life become an “educational project”, something that has to be worked at rather than simply lived, something which can always be improved (...). The imperative is to identify and meet a whole range of potential needs and desires on the part of developing children” (Vincent, 2000, p23).

This explains why certain parents’ demands and expectations of the school were virtually limitless. And this level of expectation had obvious repercussions in the pressures to which teachers and the children themselves were subjected. Indeed, even the pupils lived a life of strong stress: besides the many activities open to them through the LTA run by the parents’ association - swimming, music, judo, dance, drama - they also had activities in the evenings - piano, fencing, violin... Teachers try to prevail upon parents, but with little success:

"I always say to them, 'Don't enrol your children in so many activities. Let them play a bit; they spend long enough at school as it is. But they want them to be little graduates in primary school'" (deputy head, Main School).

The existence of an LTA with a wide variety of activities thus constitutes one of the main reasons for choosing the school:

"The parents want lots of activities. For them this school is like a private school. And better than a private school, because it's a state school with almost the same number of activities on offer" (deputy head, Main School).

It is the parents who run the LTA and the canteen, and who maintain contacts with the Language Institute. They are therefore in charge of the whole process of (belated) modernization of Portuguese primary education. They also deal, through outside contracts, with many of the social services of the school: lunches, supervision of the children and indirect social support (for example study visits). In a word, they in effect take upon themselves many of the duties incumbent on the State in the field of basic education.

It can therefore be stated that, even before the implementation of the new model of school based management in Portugal, there was already considerable differentiation between Portuguese state schools. Middle-class schools had a "modern" nucleus of education at their disposal, consisting of certain curricular activities (projects, the support of specialist teachers) and a comprehensive extra-curricular programme (languages, arts, sports). Besides this, they enjoyed logistic and social infrastructures (canteen, supervision of pupils outside class-time, security) that did not exist in the majority of Portuguese primary schools.

Schools with mainly under-privileged pupils, and which did not have the support of parent associations or local patrons, could only in exceptional cases diversify their educational offer and provide additional school services such as canteens, supervision and leisure-time activities. They therefore attracted an ever smaller and more socially deprived population.

Parental involvement in Portuguese Schools as a result of the adoption of the School Based Management (SBM) Model

Encouraging schools to be more responsive to parents and the demands of the community was one of the fundamental objectives of the new School Based Model (SBM). Accordingly, the legislation limited the number of tea-

chers allowed to attend the School Assembly (less than 50%), the principal decision-making structure, and delegated to this body a wide set of responsibilities:

- for the definition of local educational policies (approving the educational project, the school regulations, the guidelines for producing the budget and the proposals for the school's autonomy contract).
- for keeping abreast of and evaluating the various proceedings (checking progress reports on the plan of activities, the results of the school's internal assessment process, and the balance sheets).

In addition, the School Assembly ensured that parents were represented on the Board of Studies, albeit in no fixed proportion to the number of teachers.

Again, though, the organisational impact of these directives varied considerably according to the context and location of the school (see Table 2). Indeed, in schools with pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, the families participated neither in the debate concerning the new management model nor in the drafting of the school's internal directives. Moreover, they were either not asked to elect their representatives, or did not come up with nominations (Gama School and Magalhães School respectively).

Table 2. *Parental Participation*

Areas of Participation	Middle class schools (Main / Pessoa Schools)	Lower Class school (Gama / Avenue /Magalhães School)
Public Debate and Explanatory Sessions for Parents	Yes	No
Choice of parents' Representatives	Nomination by the Parents' Association	Invitation of the Executive council (Gama school); Not nominated (Magalhães School)
Communication among parents' representatives	Yes, especially at Main school	No
Liaison with those represented	Through Parents' Association and Parents' meetings	No Liaison
Work groups (school regulations and project)	Yes (Main school)	No

These differences cannot be considered as peculiar to the transition phase. Indeed, three years after the beginning of the implementation of the model (see methodology) the parents of Gama School had still not managed to form an association:

“At the beginning of the year there was one extremely interested parent, who dealt with all the necessary documents for setting up a parents’ association. And we’re still waiting, because he couldn’t put it together and lost interest”. (President Executive Board, Gama School).

The situation was not so very different at Magalhães School. The Association never showed much interest in the new forms of participation and eventually ceased nominating representatives:

“This year there are no parents’ representatives at the School Assembly. Last year the president of the parent’s association went, but hardly ever: on one occasion he arrived late and on another he didn’t turn up at all. And this year they didn’t nominate anyone. They don’t seem very interested in the Assembly” (senior teacher, Magalhães School).

The absence of elected representatives was settled at Gama School by means of invitations sent out by the management (“political co-opting”). However, no channels of communication were created either between representatives and parents, or between the parents who attended meetings of the different bodies. In this way, the parents had little political clout when it came to safeguarding the interests of the families. Testimonies reflect the isolation and vulnerability of these members:

“There is very little we can do in these circumstances. You are on your own. There is no Association, no one you can discuss things with. I don’t even know the parents who go to the School Assembly”. (parents’ representative on the Board of Studies, Gama School).

“The parents try to voice their opinion on the Board of Studies and at the Assembly, but they always hold back. Because they’re known as the parents of such and such a pupil, they won’t speak on behalf of the other parents or of an association. They’re afraid it’ll be taken out on their child (...). And the parents are also easily disarmed: “you can’t do that because of the law”; “there’s no point in writing to the DREL because the answer will be no”” (contracted teacher, Gama School).

In middle class schools, the parents were aware of the increased power conferred on them by the new management model: better access to information, the possibility of “brandishing” the public image of the school, certain changes in teachers’ attitudes, more direct influence on the decision-making process. They did not, however, exercise their pressure within the “limited” sphere of the new set of responsibilities:

“For a long time we’d been doing a lot of things that this new model only made official. And there are others that we shall have to go on solving in other ways, just as we had already been doing through contacts with the Town Hall, the local education authority and the school board itself” (Father, Parent Association, Main school).

In fact, a major part of the power of upper middle class families lies in their ability to wield different types of influence at the same time: pressure by certain groups of parents on particular teachers, pressure on management, easy access to information and the central administration, exploiting the right to intervention.

The ability of upper middle class parents to exploit the school system to the best advantage of their children can be “measured” by the “achievements” of Main school parent association over a twelve-year period: the construction a new school and Kindergarten; a full programme of leisure-time activities; school support services (canteen, cleaning, security); improvements to the school’s infrastructures (painting, modernisation of the toilet amenities, gardening, a covered play area); quick substitution of teachers (in cases of absence, late appointment or “unsuitability”); a strong academic curriculum with some curricular innovations and the “right” of preference concerning some members of the staff (permanent teachers).

However, mention should be made of the fact that much of the stress suffered by teachers and managers in middle class schools was not so much the result of pressure exerted by the official representatives of the parents but of pressure exerted by certain active minorities. These minorities were mainly composed of parents who supported a definite convergence between the managerial practices of the school and those typifying the private sector:

“you [the head] must tell them [the teachers] what to do. It should be like it is in companies. If you’re a good worker, you get support and incentives. If you’re a bad worker, or don’t want to work, you’re out. It’s as simple as that” (meeting of a small group of parents and the head teacher, convened because of the problem of teacher substitutions, September 2000, Main School).

The same kind of pressures was brought to bear at some parents' meetings:

"The parents' association is presenting an extremely cursory activity report. We need to make a more thorough evaluation of the teachers and staff, and the quality of pupil interaction provided by the school. Everything should be quantified and written down: the number of absences and late arrivals of each teacher, the discipline problems encountered in each class, the number of times and the way in which the parents' association intervened in each particular case." (father, parent's meeting, field notes, 21.6.2000, Main School).

In principle, not a single aspect of the running of the school was immune from controversy. Incidents were sparked off because of *logistical aspects* (the quality of the food, lunch- and break-time supervision, hygiene and school security); *curricular issues* (syllabus progress rates, importance given to "academic" areas, scope and organisation of special programmes); *pedagogic matters* (teaching methods, discipline problems in classes, differences in ways of arranging the kindergarten rooms); *pupil relationships* (conflicts between pupils, rowdiness at playtime); *extracurricular activities* (setting and checking of homework, pupils' jobs at parties); *teachers' conduct* (absences, lateness, ways of "regulating" the children); *class composition* (in primary school and in the transition to preparatory school).

Although in a minority, "consumer" parents were nonetheless extremely active, especially in Main School micro-politics. They were also on the increase at this school:

"The attitude of "Newville" parents has changed a lot lately. There are more and more parents who think I should run this school like a company. They work in those big companies themselves, where everything is decided by money and dismissals, and they think that I should do the same". (President Executive council, Main school)

It should also be mentioned that the Main School parents' association, in spite of putting up a certain resistance to the more radical intentions of the "new consumers", eventually adopted many of the latter's ideas on relations with social partners. Contracts with service companies and cooperatives, originally made informally by word of mouth, became increasingly formalized and subject to periodical evaluation (LTA, food, cleaning, language centre). Former partners, e.g. the LTA "The Adventure" and the "Speakeasy" school of languages, were replaced by others offering more competitive advantages and whose

“loyalty” was guaranteed by temporary contracts that could be annually reviewed and rescinded (based on parent surveys and Parents’ Association opinion).

It was thus more and more difficult to distinguish between active citizens and consumers in the school. Moreover, the micro-political activity engaged in by both sectors often became confused and mutually reinforcing.

Conclusions

The main findings of this study confirm the risks of deepening inequalities which various authors have associated with “devolution” policies (Slee & Weiner, 1998; Derouet, 2000). In fact, that the impact of the new policies varies considerably and depends heavily on the context of the school (social status of the families, location) and, to a lesser degree, on the organisational characteristics of the school itself (size, history of the institution, leadership profile, number of senior teachers). Furthermore, the new models of school based management, by favouring forms of institutional participation in which socially disadvantaged families feel uncertain of themselves (Dias, 2002; Silva, 2001), may reinforce the assumption that these families take little interest in their children’s education. The difficulties attendant on the formation of parents’ associations in schools with a high proportion of disadvantaged pupils; the lack of nomination of representatives or their high rate of absenteeism if taken of face value may lead to the syndrome of “blaming the victim” (Davies, 1989, 1993) for a situation in which the school performs a role of “covert regulation” by privileging models of parental participation typical of the middle classes (Silva, 2001).

There is also confirmation here of the risks associated with processes of democratisation of public services based on an abstract notion of “civil society” which ignores the processes of stratification and the power relations that are embedded in social and community contexts. In fact, the existence of “parents that get what they want” from state education is far from being a peculiarity of the Portuguese (upper) middle classes:

“As for primary schools, a recent sociological study conducted in the affluent districts of Paris shows that, when these parents do not choose the private sector either for convenience or for ideological reasons, they act in such a way as to “privatise” the public schools where they are both numerically and socially in a dominant position: they use their political and social relations to better physical facilities, obtain educational materials of the highest quality and increase the number of outside activities” (Van Zanten, 1996, p69).

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