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THE IMAGINARY ABOUT THE SCHOOL AND  
THE POSSIBILITIES OF AN EQUALITARIAN SCHOOL:  
A STUDY ON THE BRAZILIAN STATE SCHOOLS

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**Abstract**

The main objective of the article is to reflect on the imaginary that the teachers of two public schools have of their students and the school they work in and the ideal of an inclusive and democratic school. In this article, we reflect on the image that the teachers of two public schools in the city of Rio Claro, São Paulo State, Brazil, have of their students and their school as an institution. We use the studies of imaginary sociology as a theoretic reference base. Castoriadis (1986); Taylor (2006); Legros et al (2007) and Baczo (1984) are the referenced authors of this article.

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Keywords: imaginary and school; equalitarian school; youth and school; education and democracy

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**1. Introduction**

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The main objective of the article is to reflect on the imaginary that the teachers of two public schools have of their students and the school they work in and the ideal of an inclusive and democratic school.

The loss of faith in the legitimacy of the school by poor youths in the city outskirts, indicate a resistance to school derived from a feeling that the knowledge obtained from school and the diploma itself are not enough to allow social ascension. Educators, such as Charlot (2002), Willis (1988), Molpeceres, Lucas and Pons (2000) point out that the loss of faith in the school as a source of relevant knowledge and as an instrument for social mobility leads the school authorities to lose their legitimacy, bringing about a feeling of a lack of sense and of arbitrary imposition of the school norms and activities. Bourdieu (2001) also points to a crisis in the school system that, at the same time as it allows the new echelons of the population to have access to schools, in contradiction, it maintains the mechanisms of social exclusion.

The analytical referential provided by the sociology of the imaginary is a fundamental contribution as a methodological reference in the study of the school institution, as we consider that the concept of the imaginary goes beyond the intellectual constructions that can be formulated by the subjects, manifesting itself concretely in the images, history and legends created by them (Legros, 2007). In this manner, the imaginary is as much present in the structure and in the daily acts as it is in the values, principles and culture of each social group.

Taylor (2006) distinguishes the social imaginary and social theory, firstly because he considers the imaginary as being the manner in which people “imagine” their social surroundings presented through culture; secondly, as he considers that the theory is limited to a small minority, while the imaginary is a collective conception of vast groups of people, if not by the society as a whole; and finally, he considers that the social imaginary is what allows for common practices and their legitimacy, giving sense to these actions as a group. According to Taylor, the social imaginary is not only an ideology, but it defines concepts and practices that characterize the different historical, economic and social contexts. This author further elucidates that modernity, in its origin as in actuality, with its multiple modernisms, should be understood from the different social imaginaries constructed.

Castoriadis (1986) is another author who works with the concept of the social imaginary and its importance for the understanding of institutions. He tells about the significance of the imaginary in the constitution of institutions, joining the imaginary and functionality as complementary elements in this process. He states that the institution is a symbolic network, socially sanctioned, where a functional component and an imaginary component are combined in varied proportions and relations. (p.159). These statements by Castoriadis reaffirm the role played by the imaginary in the constitution of society's structures, as from human action.

Synthesizing the ideas of these two authors we can come to the conclusion that they emphasize the role of the imaginaries created in the different economic and social contexts, as guides to the design of the social structures, as well as truths, values and actions that are legitimized by the individual. In this manner, at the same time that the imaginary guides the format of the institutions, it is built by the subjects in their day-to-day.

Adopting this referential to analyze the school, we consider that the imaginary about the school construed by its participants is an important element for the understanding of the day-to-day actions, the structures, power relationships established and the conflicts arising from these interactions. In this manner, the relationships that are processed in the school's day-to-day are practices established and legitimated by the imaginary minimally shared and negotiated among its members, that are manifested in daily acts.

Therefore we consider that the relations in the school must be understood in the larger dimension of the individual not only as an individual conscience, but also as a social being that makes and remakes concepts, impressions and feelings based on the relationship with the world he lives in and experiences inside as well as outside the institution.

Social Imaginary and the School in the Current Context: the backing for the Study of school violence

Getting back to the idea of the imaginary of each era as an important element in the constitution of the actions practiced by the different social sectors, we reflect here on some of the characteristics that constitute to imaginary of the current economic, political and social context.

Taylor (2006) brings up the issue that what we imagine can be something new, constructive, something that opens up new possibilities, but it also can be pure fiction, maybe dangerously false. He questions the possibility of the distortion of the imaginary in the sense that this may hide or conceal certain crucial realities. To this doubt, he answers that clearly yes, and he gives as an example our self image as equal citizens in a democratic State, ignoring the exclusion and inequality in our society. His argument is that if we understand “equality” as something more than a legitimizing principle, or in other words, if we imagine this as a totally effective reality, what we have done is a distortion of reality. It is looking the other way so as not to see the various excluded or dispossessed groups or to imagine that they are the only ones responsible for their situation (p.211).

The consequence of social inequality to the production of social violence and its reflection on the life of the young people has been studied by many researchers all over the world. In Brazil, Zaluar, in various articles (2001, 1994, 1998 and 1999), points out the institutional factor in Brazil’s inequality, and its consequences on the vulnerability of the young poor. Citing Dellasoppa et al (1999), he emphasizes that the authors consider that the model of social inequality in the country as what best explains the “causes” of violence in Brazil.

In this line of thought, when we analyze the school imagined as an equalitarian and fair institution, we see that we fall into the same distortion of reality described by Taylor, and well expressed by Dubet (2004) and Martucelli (2001). These authors raise questions that lead us to reflect on the role of the school and the imaginary that surrounds the current society which are important for discussions on the production and reproduction of violence in it.

On discussing what a fair school would be, Dubet (2004, p.540) poses the following questions:

- Should it be purely meritocratic, with a fair school competition between socially and individually different students?
- Should it be concerned mainly with the integration of all the students into society and with them being able to use their education?
- Should it try to make sure that the school inequalities do not have too much of a consequence on the social inequalities?

Questions such as these put into check the idea of the model of equality of meritocratic opportunities that assumes that it is fair to offer totally equal and objective schooling, ignoring the social inequalities of the

students. This is an issue existent all over the world, Dubet points out, in different countries research show that the schools that are attended by less privileged students, in general, show similar problems, such as: there are more obstacles for the poorer students, the teaching teams are less stable in difficult neighborhoods, the teacher expectations are less favorable to the less privileged families who seem to be more absent and less informed in guidance meetings, etc.

In this vein, Martucelli raises a thought that contributes to the discussion, which is the expectation that involves the school in terms of its responsibility to the forming of ethical and moral concepts. He states that in modern times, the school, further to its functions of transmitting knowledge and social selection, has been associated with a double process: on the one hand, it should permit the integration of the individuals in their society, guaranteeing the continuity of social life. On the other hand, it is guided by an ideal figure of the individual, a collective representation to which all adhere in one way or the other. (p.258). However, one comes to the conclusion that what has concretely happened is the development of an empty individualism, more and more focused on individual techniques and skills and less and less sure of their ideas.

As a consequence of this process, Martucelli points out the utilitarianism that permeates the education offered by the school system, transforming its inside actions into mere processes for the preservation of the life of the organization.

As a consequence, the actions that are carried out will be restricted merely to the preservation of the school as an organization, making the teachers and the administration abdicate their own tasks of educators, as those who provide the universal values of the human being, further to technical and scientific knowledge.

The imaginary of a school in these molds is that of a school for an ideal individual who fits in or who should perfectly fit into the idealized organizational model as well as into an equalitarian society that is based on the principle that all have the same opportunity and the same economic and social origin. For the teachers, the students fit neither into an imagined equalitarian school organization, nor into the image of the idealized student. This imaginary enters into shock with reality, provoking conflicts that not only put the students into opposition with the school, but also the teachers with the school.

In Taylor's thoughts on the social imaginary, he points out the inseparability of the social imaginary from the time and space in which it is created, in this way, we call attention to aspects of the social imaginary from a perspective that Sennett (2006) calls the "New Culture of Capitalism".

This new culture of capitalism, defined by Sennett, helps us understand the school organization not only as the relationship of the student with the school, but also of the teacher with the school, when we reflect on the characteristics of the teachers in the context of today's school.

Sennett (2006,) makes reference to the three social deficits in this context of new capitalism, as being: the low institutional loyalty; the lessening of the informal trust between employees and the weakening of institutional knowledge. These three deficits are connected by an intellectual tool that is the “social capital”, which consists of the relationship networks that the person is linked to. Organizations with higher social capital have more loyalty and vice-versa, according to Sennett. The other deficit, the lessening of the informal trust between employees, refers to the issue of knowing on who one can count on in a situation of pressure or necessity. Sennett states that the informal trust between employees needs time to be developed and in the context where relationships and institutions are “liquid”, as Bauman (2004) states, the difficulty in the establishment of this trust is hindered. The third deficit highlighted by Sennett, the weakening of institutional knowledge, refers to the certainties that went along with the bureaucratic organizational structure, job and social security that were weakened in this new context where work has become flexible and precarious.

Further to these deficits, Sennet calls attention to the concept of the citizen as a consumer, that has permeated the social relationships in the context of what is called the new capitalism. He considers that when citizens act as modern consumers, they stop thinking as artisans, and as a consequence no longer have the commitment to knowledge and to what they do, in order to become simply a consumer.

Using Sennets’s aforementioned thoughts to analyze what happens in the day-to-day of the school organization, we can see that the characteristics described by this author have an intimate relationship with the imaginary about the school and the conflict and violence present within it. The imaginary of an equalitarian school that is safe and that favors the integration of the individuals into society conflicts with the lack of loyalty, informal trust and of different aspects of organizational knowledge.

### **Research Methodology and techniques**

The research technique utilized was in first place to ask the teachers to answer an individual questionnaire (attachment A). After the individual responses the answers were collected, groups were formed and the answers were distributed randomly, in such a way that whoever responded the questions would not be part of the group analyzing the answers. The answers were analyzed by each group and the each group was asked to make a poster using magazine cut-outs, to express the principle responses given by their colleagues.

Due to the above thoughts and to the referential of the imaginary to analyze the state schools in this research, the following main analysis categories were used:

- 1) The imaginary about today’s school and the real students in this context.

- 2) The imaginary about the role the school plays in the life of the students.
- 3) The imaginary about the students' families.
- 4) The imaginary about the social reality and the school in this context.

The research was carried out in two schools located in a neighborhood in the outskirts of the city of Rio Claro, São Paulo, Brazil. These schools are attended by students with precarious socio economic conditions who live in the neighborhood.

In the analysis of the data, the answers given to the questionnaire as well as the posters made by each group were taken into account. The selection of the issues expressed on the posters was considered an important factor for analysis as this corresponded to what the teachers considered to be the fundamental issue.

In School 1, 21 teachers participated in the activity and in School 2, 33 teachers did.

## **Conclusions**

In the two schools where the study was made, we came to the conclusion that the imaginary of school and of student built by teachers is based on the model of school and of students of the times when the school was a place for just a few. These imaginary students are the students who come to school neat and clean, well fed and well dressed; they do their homework with the support of their families; they recognize the importance of knowledge in their lives and therefore respect the teachers. The real and concrete school for them, as Dubet & Bellet (2000) state, is an island of order and of culture in the midst of an ocean of disorder and ignorance. The students are disorderly, have “unstructured” families and some of them should not even be attending school.

In this manner, we arrive at the conclusion that there is a vast distance between the school with the imagined student and the concrete reality of the lives of the real students. In our view, this fact creates significant difficulties as much for the learning process as for the human relationships within the school. We propose that activities for the continued development of the teachers be carried out so that they are able to analyze the school, taking into account the aspects presented here.

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