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Resistance through participation: Brazilian students and the conduct of everyday life in schools

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Abstract

After 21 years under a violent military dictatorship, institutions' democratization processes took place in Brazil in the past three decades, starting from the Constitution of 1988. As one of the actors in the struggles for democracy, psychologists whose practices are committed to its consolidation in different contexts are constantly facing challenges due to the contradiction between government's democratic discourses and its authoritarian practices - which tends to be increasingly constant with the rise of a far-right government to the power. This scenario demands, more than ever, that Brazilian Psychology liberates itself from uncritical conceptions to build decolonizing foundations and practices for strengthening and expanding people's agency. Considering school as an everyday life context for people in the early stages of development, we understand this place as a privileged space for the intervention of psychologists. We intend to share in this presentation some reflections built from participatory action research on how psychologists can promote the participation of students in school. We argue that, in a context of constant attacks to people's rights, creating conditions for children to recognize and expand possibilities of action to conduct their everyday lives, as well as producing science that supports it, is a great form of resistance and contribution Psychology can make in such dark days.

Keywords: Participation; child development; democracy; German critical psychology

Introduction

This paper reflects on the Brazilian political context to elucidate the problem of political participation from the standpoint of German Critical Psychology theoretical foundations. We present a few considerations about Brazilian political history to set light to concrete conditions of development of agency with a focus on school, as one of the most important institutions for child development. We argue that, if participation does not constitute children's everyday life activities, the horizon of truly participatory democracy – and a society that is organized around common interests – is more and more distant.

To begin with this reflection, we highlight a more recent event, that is, the last general elections, in October 2018, when Jair Bolsonaro was elected president of the Republic. Bolsonaro gained greater prominence in the public debate in 2016, as the Federal Congressman who honored Col. Carlos Alberto Brilhante Ustra during the impeachment vote for then-President Dilma Rousseff. Ustra was the head of the largest organ of political repression during the Brazilian civil-military dictatorship and was condemned in 2008 for the practice of torture. Different actors and social movements that took part in the struggle for the re-democratization of the country, after 21 years of Dictatorship, wondered how Brazilian people could elect someone with such an undemocratic speech. In fact, in the second round of the 2018 election, most Brazilians did not vote for Bolsonaro if we consider that more than 20% of the population able to vote abstained, almost 10% of those who voted opted for null or void and almost 45% of the valid votes went to the candidate of the workers' party. However, faced with political contradictions, Brazil elected - democratically - an anti-democratic president, by the votes of the minority.

As expected, the election of Bolsonaro preceded numerous anti-democratic measures, but attacking Brazilian democracy is still something similar to attacking a child in its first steps. Authors like O'Donnell (2011) and Fernandes (1972) discuss the fragility of Latin American democracies that are constituted under the domination of global north countries - and persist while they can serve the interests of the dominant power. Thus, different Latin American countries have in common a history marked by coups and ruptures, used as a resource to prevent the expansion of popular participation, especially when this participation antagonizes the interests of hegemonic power (Lombardi & Lima, 2017). Even so, under a cruel dictatorship, Brazilian popular movements gained important rights in the democratization process of the country, influencing chapters of the 1988 Brazilian Constitution on social security, health, education, etc. Thus, participation and social control of institutions were established as basic rights, but much needed to be done to turn the law into concrete reality.

In short, more than three decades have passed since that historic moment, but the country still suffers from different forms of inheritances of the dictatorial period. In this paper, we highlight one of them, which is the issue of participation itself. Even though they have the right to participate, most people do not know how to, beyond voting. In consequence, a large part of Brazilian people has their everyday lives reduced to an “inglorious struggle for survival” according to the terms used by Tonet (2002).

It is worth considering that political rights were significantly expanded during the period of the Workers' Party government, established in 2003 and extended to 2016. As an example, we mention the Decree issued in 2014, instituting the National Policy for Social Participation (Brazil, 2014), which listed mechanisms of social participation for dialogue and joint action between the federal administration and civil society. Although permeated

by limitations, the Decree represented a great advance in democratization in the sense of recognizing popular organizations and opening channels of dialogue and partnership for the implementation of public policies, something that previously had only been achieved in a very scattered way. In contrast, there was little progress during this period in improving the quality of education, one of the pillars of conscious democratic participation. As Davies (2016) points out, the period was marked by incentives for the privatization of higher education, the non-prioritization of public resources invested in education, and the adoption of large-scale evaluations, which end up making schools and teachers almost exclusively responsible for education. Add to this, the constant corruption scandals that have corroborated the production of discredit and aversion to left-wing political parties (Davis & Straubhaar, 2020).

This whole process brings us back to the problem of Bolsonaro's election, who rose to power precisely by positioning himself as the main enemy of the Left. One of Bolsonaro's first measures was the extinction of the mentioned National Policy of Social Participation. The president does not hide his anti-democratic intentions, therefore, a political scenario with less and less room for participation is being built. Faced with this scenario of accelerated changes and sudden reversal of rights conquered in years of struggle, we wonder how critical psychology could contribute to the scenarios in which resistance is increasingly necessary?

In our research group (Psychosocial Evaluation and Intervention: Prevention, Community and Liberation – Pontifical Catholic University of Campinas) we have sought to develop actions by articulating and building groundings of critical psychology which are necessary for the strengthening of people and promotion of development in public schools (Guzzo et al., 2015). Brazilian public school as a context for psychology intervention and research reveals important contradictions that permeate the conduct of everyday life in a society marked by inequality and violence. As a privileged space for monitoring the development of children and organizing preventive actions, the school has been a powerful space for the development of psychology committed to the popular majorities. In this sense, we are committed to building, since 2014, an extension project to confront violence in schools, based on the articulation of the foundations of Cultural-Historical Psychology on human development, of Liberation Psychology on violence in Latin American contexts and German Critical Psychology, which highlights the different forms of agency in the conduct of everyday life from the subject standpoint.

This research was born from the experience of this extension project, in which we sought to build participatory spaces for confronting violence. In our observations, we identified that school, as one of the most important institutions for the strengthening of democracy, is not only undemocratic but also systematically discredits the importance of student participation. We identified that even bills that represent advances in the democratization of this institution by the idea of democratic school management tend to emphasize the importance of promoting adult participation (e.g., teachers and family members) but neglect the role of the student (Carvalho et al., 2018). Therefore, the few participatory spaces in which students could participate either exist only in a bureaucratic way or don't even exist in schools. As an example, in the school where we developed this research, class assembly activities had been canceled because, according to the pedagogical coordinator, "the students do not know how to participate". But how do people acquire the necessary skills to participate? What are these skills? How could psychologists collaborate in the development of participatory people?

Vigotski sheds light on these issues by unveiling the central role of social relations in human development by pointing out that every proper human psychological function develops as an inter-psychological category, in the interactions that transmit the human culture objectified by the signs, and then, by the internalization of these signs are configured as an intra-psychological category (Veresov, 2010). If the development takes place based on concrete social relationships between people, it also takes place in concrete everyday life circumstances.

In this sense Holzkamp (2016) emphasizes the need for psychology to turn its gaze to everyday life, seeking to unveil human agency from the subject's standpoint. Holzkamp (2016) highlights that in the process of conducting life, people are faced with different possibilities of action. In societies with less freedom, such as the military dictatorship previously mentioned, for example, the possibilities will be more restricted while in freer societies they will be more expanded. Thus, building a more democratic society means widening possibilities for action, which can be difficult for popular majorities, since often the expansion of their possibilities contrasts with the interests of the dominant power.

In this context, Holzkamp points out that people tend to act in contradiction to their life interests, seeking to expand their agency without changing the structures of meaning and possibilities for action in the conduct of life, that is, without expanding control over their living conditions and within the framework of the possibilities "granted" by power – which can be withdrawn at any time. Thus, in seeking short-term satisfaction, the subject ends up damaging his long-term interests. To this modality of action, Holzkamp has attributed the term "restrictive agency", as opposed to "generalized agency".

As a conceptual pair developed for analysis and elucidation of how individuals face situations of threat or limits to their agency, it does not classify people or social groups, but specific situations, so that once in a while we come across these alternatives in the conduct of life. Holzkamp (2016) explains that in the restrictive modality, contradictions appear at the level of the reasons for action, that is, the subject builds his reasons for action on false or insufficient premises so that his actions can turn against his interests. Holzkamp (2016a) points out that, naturally, the subject uses defenses that prevent him or her from coming into contact with the contradiction to be, in the long run, compromising the strengthening of the common ground on which he or she could expand his/her possibilities of action in a generalized way. In this "common ground" he or she encounters the subjects with whom to share life situations since the generalized agency would be the alternative in which subjects collectively seek to increase control and conscious-generalized prediction about the individually relevant life conditions.

When considering the process of agency development Højholt and Kousholt (2018) discuss that in focusing the child as someone who needs to learn to adapt, there is a neglect of the importance of giving children the experience of being influential. Thus, personal development and the development of social communities are interdependent dimensions. By exercising influence and collaboration with others to expand the possibilities of action in a concrete development context, children also change the ways of conducting life in other contexts.

Based on these understandings, we formulated the thesis that psychologist's interventions in the school, grounded on a critical perspective, contribute to conscientization, which may lead to an improvement of students' agency (Meireles, 2020). This thesis was defended in a Ph.D. research that sought to present evidence of how the spaces of participation in the

school, mediated by Psychology, allow students to deepen their understanding of the reasons involved in the daily problems they face in school, bringing changes to their agency. As specific objectives, we sought:

- 1) To evaluate students' knowledge of participatory laws
- 2) To know and analyze the forms of organization, guidelines, and referrals proposed by students in the spaces of participation
- 3) To identify which are the actions and conceptions of the students that favor and which hinder their effective participation in the organization of the school daily life
- 4) To identify the structure and dynamics of the school that hinder or facilitate student participation
- 5) To present elements present in the action of Psychology that can contribute to overcoming these difficulties

Method

The researchers were present in one of the extension project's schools, and participatory action research was conducted. According to McTaggart (1997), in this type of research subjects have authentic participation from the elaboration to the development and consequences of the process. 250 students between 12 and 15 years old participated in this research during the years 2015 to 2017. Throughout these three years, the researcher was present at the school for 4 hours a week, carrying out activities to strengthen student participatory spaces in the school, with a focus on the construction of class assemblies.

Each 6th to 9th-grade class held a monthly assembly in a 1h/class to discuss topics chosen by students themselves. We developed with the students a methodology for the assemblies, which involved a preparatory stage with the collective construction of agreements, rules of operation for the meetings, and then the holding of the assemblies in three stages: 1) collective decision of the theme to be discussed 2) characterization of the problem/issue discussed 3) search for proposals for resolving/addressing the problem. The assemblies were recorded by students in minutes and by psychologists in field diaries.

We analyzed 97 field diaries, 36 minutes with registers of the assemblies' agreements, 55 class assemblies' minutes, and the material resulting from the application of a self-assessment scale on school participation, answered by students. The scales evaluated three dimensions of participation from the standpoint of the subject-students: 1) attribution of the power of decision on different common situations of school everyday life to the different actors of the school community; 2) Evaluation of which participatory spaces – among which the students are entitled by law – the students participated or at least knew about it; 3) Evaluation of how the students perceive the possibilities for action in their actual school. 92 students responded to both applications, the first in the early year 2016 and the second application at the end of 2017. The application was carried out twice to compare students' perceptions before and after the development of the project

Results

We present here a summary of our research results. The analysis of the different sources of information made it possible to construct five statements, related to our five specific objectives.

1. Participation requires knowing/recognizing possibilities for action

Five were the participatory spaces evaluated, but only a minority of students declared they knew about or actually participated at them. The maximum amount of participation in the first application of the instrument was 23% in the class assemblies, which were just beginning as one of the extension project's interventions. If participation is quantitatively small, it is still necessary to evaluate its quality, since it is often carried out in a merely bureaucratic way.

When we state that participation means knowing/recognizing possibilities for action, we understand that besides "hearing about it" it is necessary that students have clarity about the existence of these possibilities and their way of functioning. Recognizing spaces is a step further because it implies, first, that educators promote and respect student participation, and second, that students go beyond mere knowledge to the confidence that they can exercise real influence through participation.

2. Participation requires broadening agency

The results highlighted the importance of the definition of agreements for assemblies' functioning, especially considering that, for most students, this practice was still a novelty. It was identified in the registration of agreements that students find it easier to think of a rule about something that is present in everyday life and applies to any other group relationship (such as respecting colleagues), compared to issues of organization and involvement (e.g., speaking one at a time), which are specific to the participatory space.

While it is important to agree on the rules of operation, it is also important for students to commit to what they have established. The content of the assemblies' minutes and, above all, field diaries sheds light on how students have or have not fulfilled their organizational proposals over the years. Analyzing them, we raise some challenges and potentialities concerning student participation: As challenges, we point to the need to overcome the mere description of problems and promote an analysis, identifying their possible causes and consequences; promote knowledge and participation in collegiate bodies as a way to advance collective decisions, and promote actions that expand the possibilities of action in the long term. As potentialities, we highlight the positive results regarding the organization and coherence of the minutes; the expansion of students' autonomy in the choice of themes; the high rates of self-responsibility, and proposals involving the collective.

3. Participation requires students' willingness

We identify conceptions and actions that make student participation difficult and conceptions and actions that make it easier. The criteria used to classify something as a factor that makes it harder or easier consists of analyzing whether, within that context, such conception or action collaborates or not to expand possibilities of student action. By highlighting what is a factor of difficulty we place some stakes that allow the proposals of student participation to be made from concrete experiences, and not idealized conceptions about students who come to school ready to participate. On the other hand, by highlighting the factors that make it easier, we highlight the potentialities of the students, opposing understandings of their participation as impossible. We identified that the frequency of occurrences of the categories of actions and conceptions that make student's participation easier tends to be higher (mainly concerning actions). Thus, we emphasize that concrete

students, permeated by contradictory conceptions and actions are, in general, very willing to build spaces of participation.

In this sense, we have managed to list different points to be worked on so that the actions and conceptions that are harder, anti-democratic, fatalistic, and individualistic can be overcome giving rise to new forms of relationship of the student - with him or herself, with other people and with the school - and so that the facilitating conceptions and actions become generalized. The results of the scale reveal that it is necessary to promote students' awareness about the importance of participation of different actors in school since there was a tendency to attribute to themselves the responsibility of deciding only the playful stuff (such as parties, outdoor classes) and to attribute to principals and teachers the task of solving diverse problems. In the field diaries, we saw that learning dialogue and orderly speech is one of the challenges that permeates almost all difficulties, because for doing that, students need to manage anxieties and frustrations, to organize thoughts and desires in argumentative speech, to be willing to review their attitudes, etc. We have also identified that many students are seen as a reference in the classroom, and when they can overcome hardened conceptions and pose deeper questions and analyses about a problem, they assume a role leading other students to reflect on issues that they may not have reflected on themselves.

4. Participation requires democratization of the school

Starting from the objective of identifying the structure and dynamics of the school that makes student participation difficult or easy, we find in the perceptions of students manifested in the scales and field diaries a series of important issues to be considered. To begin with the elements that make it difficult, we highlight different practices of other school actors that express the resistance or devaluation of the intervention done with students. The hierarchical forms of relationship that are established in schools cannot be understood as individual problems, but accompany the entire historical and cultural process in Brazilian society, which in a few moments was able to experience democratic relations.

If we add to this fact everyday difficulties faced by actors in public schools, such as few resources, crowded classrooms, precarious working conditions, and, consequently, precarious learning, we have a very hostile scenario for the development of dialogic practices. In this sense, we understand teachers blame students when the activities do not work out as they expected. Speeches, sermons, tantrums, and other forms of restrictive agency end up maintaining the concrete conditions as they are and intensify the problem by building a relationship of rivalry between teachers and students. Thus, if it is necessary to add the promotion of critical reflections to the instrumentalization for student participation, it is no different with teachers and managers.

Another important issue to be worked on with these actors is the notion of development that enables us to understand participation as something to be learned through participatory experience. With this, it is possible to deconstruct fatalistic discourses that there is no point in allowing students to participate because they "don't know how to participate", and to build a perspective more focused on the mediations necessary for development, first as an inter-psychological, then as an intra-psychological function (Vigotski, 2018).

If there are many difficulties, even greater are the potentialities revealed by the content analyzed. Teachers and students in dialogue about their relationship, about pedagogical processes and school activities; managers dialoguing with student representatives about the

agendas of the assembly and doing their best to comply with or at least explain why that action is not feasible are examples that point out that the democratization of the school is not about an idealized world, but about concrete and perfectly possible practices. We see that all school actors must be aligned regarding the practices that promote the development of student participation, the formative process of these actors is so much more effective when it happens in social practice. Many speeches can be given to teachers about how they should be more democratic, but we found in the field diaries several moments of greater awareness occurred when they could be part of the participatory space, composing the network of subjects who relate and "lend" each other their understanding and functions. In these moments the recognition of the importance of that experience grows exponentially and new possibilities of action are also unveiled to teachers - after all, all the subjects who share this experience are developing.

5. Psychologist's Interventions and mediations

Among the interventions established by the psychology team and recorded in field diaries, a very present element was the identification of conflict. This question resonates with the thesis of Moreira (2015), also developed in our research group from the insertion in this extension project, which defends that the interventions of the psychologist at school, when guided by the identification and characterization of limit-situations, contribute to the promotion of children's development and, therefore, constitute critical preventive actions. In other words, the identification of limit-situations is of great importance for prevention to occur, but to do so, the psychologist must be part of school everyday practices.

In addition to conflicts/problems that can be understood as limit-situations, moments of promoting discussions have been identified to broaden the awareness of the students about the situations they face at school; moments of stimulation of participation and suggestion of proposals, mediations that make the space more fruitful and possible and also some more informative interventions.

With the re-application of the scale, it became evident that there were significant changes during the period of the intervention on the extension project. Considering that the same students responded to both applications, we can affirm that there was a greater sharing of responsibilities, the perspective of the students on who should decide each question related to school everyday life changed and, in general, pointed to the conception that more actors should participate in more decisions. In the second part, it is evident that the lack of knowledge about participatory spaces diminished, and more students declared to participate in the school's decisions. Concerning the last part of the scale, which assesses how democratic the school is according to the students' standpoint, a greater variation can be observed - some possibilities have been expanded and others restricted. Even so, it is possible to state that, in general, school practices have become more democratic from the students' standpoint. It must be emphasized that the scale does not measure the effectiveness of the psychologist's interventions, but by showing significant changes in the responses of students regarding participation in school, it is a further indicator that the interventions of the extension project team have brought significant changes.

Concluding remarks

Preliminary results of this research endorse the view that participation as an exercise of influence in the construction of everyday life is an essential factor for the development of

the generalized agency. By building spaces located in the contexts of Brazilian public schools we were able to observe the different social contradictions that make the conduct of life more complex and conflictive. As Højholt (2016) points out with the concept of "situated inequality", there are differences in the social distribution of the possibilities for being part of and influencing social contexts. The results of this research show this inequality at different moments and among different actors: sometimes it is established in the relationship between children - when one uses force to obtain what he or she wishes to the detriment of the other, sometimes in the relationships between children and adults.

It is perceived that there is resistance from principals and teachers in creating possibilities for student participation. Policies that lay the responsibility for teaching almost exclusively to the school help to endorse the idea that if there is school failure, the fault lies in the school itself. Thus, students and teachers are often not understood as collaborators in producing higher-quality teaching and learning, but as rivals with conflicting interests. It is common the understanding that if students have greater power of influence, they will organize themselves and revolt against the school, making pedagogical activities impossible, precisely because they do not know how to participate.

On the other hand, it is evident that in face of the few opportunities for effective participation throughout their schooling, many students end up hindering their participation, either because of their antidemocratic conceptions or their actions. At no time do we take this from a naturalized perspective, but we try to reveal the different ways in which in different contexts these understandings and actions were produced and reproduced as the best or only possibilities they had or perceived. The challenge, therefore, was to broaden the understanding of other possibilities and to instrumentalize them with some practices necessary for the collective management of problems or daily situations. By creating experiences of participation and collective conduct of everyday life for children, we understand schools can have a great role in building a more participative and democratic society, as long as, of course, school fulfills its pedagogical function (Saviani, 2008).

In this sense, we could highlight the ways theoretical groundings of psychology can support the defense of such experiences for the development of people who will be able to democratically solve social conflict in different life situations. These understandings make it possible to overcome traditional psychology's practices which build treatments for supposed pathologies or limitations in the child that do not fit the conditions of learning and interacting with others. Instead of seeking individual explanations for (non) participation (such as "Brazilian people does not want to participate"), German Critical Psychology's grounds shed light on the importance of building experiences that put the individual in a position to perceive his/her possibilities of action and, from a generalized and collective perspective, other possibilities emerge. In a context of constant attacks on people's rights, creating conditions for children to recognize and expand possibilities of action to conduct their everyday lives, as well as producing science that supports it, is a great form of resistance and a contribution Psychology can make in such dark days.

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