

Portugal: Manifest for the Republic Education or teacher education under scrutiny

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Abstract

Starting from the analysis of a Manifest placed in the World Wide Web in order to gather signatures, the paper discusses the arousal of a wide spread movement of scepticism in the so called Portuguese “civil society” against the overall result of almost forty years of uninterrupted educational reform that has taken place in Portugal since the late sixties and has lead to an increasing percentage of illiteracy and innumeracy. That Manifest is presented as part of a broader movement, deeply rooted in the Portuguese society, and silent so far, which is becoming stronger and has now strength enough to be part of the political agenda.

It is also our concern to unveil an emerging trend of blaming sciences of education and badly trained teachers as responsible for the poor outcome of our schooling system.

1. Introduction

The recent publication on the Internet of a document called “Manifest for the Republic Education”, in order to collect signatures from anonymous citizens and mobilise them against the supposed inadequacy of education and teacher education to the real needs of the country, has raised the questions of knowing both who and how is supposed to evaluate the educational system. Both laterally and concomitantly to these questions, the engaged writing of the Manifest transports a set of diffuse impressions mostly generalised among the “public opinion” with strength enough to anticipate the verdict about the phenomenon of the existing inadequacy. What we want to question with this

paper is whether the conclusions are supposed to come only in the end, after a serene and global analysis, or not.

Nevertheless, extremely critical opinions regarding the working of the educational system have been published, particularly on the press. And from the data collected by us we can objectively see that most of them do convey a feeling of mistrust concerning the educational sciences. Even when these sciences are not explicitly mentioned they are regarded as an important target to be reached. This is the context in which the Manifest appears. Our purpose is to understand the “deep” discourse of the Manifest and unveil, through a content analysis, non-explicit objectives related to education and teacher education, which are characteristic of one particular moment probably shared by other European and non-European countries.

2. The press as the background

Portuguese opinion makers have given great attention to education at the same time the idea of an installed crisis has been growing in the interior of the educational system. The European studies about literacy showing us our bad places in the international rankings (OECD PISA, 2000) took off the lid of that feeling of uneasiness. On the other hand, the verification of the poor skills and knowledge of our youngsters, in the access exams to the university level in such vital areas as physics and mathematics, or the recruitment by the universities of students having negative access marks to the courses they apply for (Ministério da Educação. DGES, 2001) already denounced something was wrong in education. Another example of this crisis, even if it is a paradox, was the absurd of having access to medicine only with marks around 19 (in a scale 0-20), letting out of the course hundreds of candidates when it's unquestionable there's a great lack of doctors obliging us to recruit them from Spain, for example.

Nevertheless the target of those criticisms is difficult to border, reaching some collateral and eventually less important purposes. One of those aims is that imprecise thing called by the gazetteers as “sciences of education”, or in a more synthetic way as “pedagogy”, giving the idea of a strong correlation between the crisis and the appearance and affirmation of those “sciences” in teacher education. Or the opposite idea: previously the system worked much better without their contribution.

Recently one of the most read magazines in Portugal published an article in which the author ironically transcribed a test of a subject matter related to Education and Values, taught in a Teacher's College. Here is the first question:

“In an age of awkward, systematic, and fragmentary dogmatisms, labialisms, cultural tourisms, pragmatisms, scepticisms, determinisms, fatalisms, autisms, narcissisms, roughisms... - more or less camouflaged by endogenous and exogenous dynamics – a glimpse, though perfunctory, over the programmatic skeleton of the subject matter, allows to figure out as reasonable, at a threshold, the possibility of unweaving it in the following axiological dichotomies [...], e. g. Education-Ethics; Culture-Civilization; Values-References. Bringing into prominence the underlying, atypical and unwritten heritage – genetic, material and spiritual – upstream and downstream the student, weave a synoptic comment (corroborating or denying) anchored on the axiological dimension and valid empirical and speculative arguments” (cited by P. Norton, 2002, Visão, 39).

The almost unintelligible vocabulary used by the teacher, possibly to make his science more “scientific” (because it was not understood by the outsiders) drew the credibility the text presumably aimed to, and offered a valid pretext to the attack to these sciences.

“The educational system has fallen down. When it happens, it's urgent another sort of intervention not characteristic of normal processes. The confusion is so great and the values are so much inverted and with no references, that a strong leadership and capacity of quick decision are indispensable to take the national education into the ways that don't put the development of the country in danger. We've grown up, but we haven't developed ourselves enough. Our delay is not to be coped with slow processes, of doubtful efficiency. I can guess criticisms to what I say. I can anticipate it's easy to be contested by the supporters of the “dialogue”, “the broadest liberties”, “the already gained rights”, etc. Nevertheless, I run the risk and I rebel myself against the wave that has drowned us in mediocrity for two decades” (Santana Castilho, 2002).

Some time ago one of the most influent Portuguese intellectuals affirmed in an article:

“[...] the pedagogues have decreed a thing that time speed has favoured: no one is supposed to be bored even when they are all depressed with the way they

amuse themselves. Since pedagogy has described itself as a way to avoid efforts, we've come to the conclusion that every effort is boring. So if a book has many pages it is obviously an outrage against happiness and it has to be reduced to its insignificance, that's to say, it has to be resumed" (E. Prado Coelho, 2000).

A short time before, one of our references in social sciences had no problems in writing an article saying the following:

"Until quite recently everyone agreed that the assessment of acquired knowledge was one of the teachers' jobs, but this idea has been questioned by modern pedagogy, which supports the thesis that the "partners" going along the educational path have the same rights and duties. Besides, this supposed science has been arguing that we should give priority in the analysis of teachers' CV to the pedagogic qualities in detriment of scientific competences, the only assessable ones" (M. F. Mónica, 2002).

It's interesting to note the way the article finishes:

"But what is more interesting is the dangerous evolution towards the use of the courts to decide about academic conflicts and the idea of the possibility of evaluating the pedagogic competence of a teacher. No, we mustn't do that. No, it's impossible to do that" (Ibidem).

Another influent social scientist and political commenter points out the following seventh bad idea (among thirty) that cement Portuguese school:

"The creative, ludicrous and 'project' activities are supposed to precede and overlap the formal learning ones (reading, counting, writing, expressing)" (A. Barreto, 2002).

The author doesn't explain where he got this impression or to which distance from the Portuguese school he placed himself to get this idea. We are sure he didn't get it from the curriculum or any empirical study.

Finally we've collected the opinion of a journalist who, celebrating the official investment of the new minister of education and wishing him time, patience and talent to defeat the "monster" of the Ministry of Education, makes allusion to "*some presumably innovator theories of sciences of education*", without clearing up which ones he was referring to, probably meaning them all:

“In fact, if we go on stating for example, and under the influence of some presumably innovator theories of sciences of education (on their turn influenced by an empty sociology), that every knowledge is equivalent, everything is the result of social constructions and there isn’t any definable scale of values, we soon arrive at the ridiculous state in which education is now” (H. Monteiro, 2002).

3. Generalisation and prejudice

These commenters have something in common: they are opinion makers with a relevant space in important mass media. They don’t need to justify what they write because they simply express an opinion. And there isn’t any mechanism to protect readers from incorrect and non-based statements or “impressions”, or protect them from abusive generalisations, with political objectives in mind. On the other hand, they are known people to whom the average reader recognises morality and credibility enough because they usually write about problems the reader feels as his own problems in a caustic and accurate way.

When Maria Filomena Mónica, Eduardo Prado Coelho or António Barreto write about education the way they do, the common reader doesn’t ask himself about the scientific qualification they all have nor the fact that in spite of coming from the human and social sciences, they are all denying to education the autonomy and recognition those human and social sciences have been claiming for decades in contrast with the “natural” sciences. In our opinion everything they write about pedagogy is based on an ignorant arrogance.

If it is true that texts like the questions asked in the exam of Education and Values are good to be laughed at, it’s also true that it’s not quite a reasonable attitude to extrapolate from this particular clinic case to the educational sciences in general, the same way it is not fair to make them responsible for the crisis that goes through the educational system. If we want to have a term of comparison we can think about the sound crisis existing in the national health system and the fact that nobody dares to explain it from the dark jargon used by the doctors when talking about medicine issues or to blame medical sciences for the crisis of the health system. In both cases, the involved political

variables, the education and health policies, do supposedly contain the clues to solve the problems these sectors are facing now. What contrasts is the absolutely different way these problems are dealt with in the opinion press, in a country where each one is authorised to solve the inadequacies and contradictions of the educational system on the paper at an olympic far distance, that's to say, without truly plunging into the reality.

Beside the ostensive ignorance and abusive generalisation, there's another cement uniting the opinions (in fact mere opinions) of opinion makers as Maria Filomena Mónica and Eduardo Prado Coelho in one same block. We are referring to the prejudice about the competences teachers should have either they work in the university or in pre-school. The depreciation of pedagogy and the unfounded and erroneous supposition of the impossibility of evaluating, even indirectly, teachers' pedagogic competences, in addition to the supposition that "pedagogy" and "modern pedagogy" (nominated but not characterised entities) do have purposes of too much simplification and calamitous paternalism are very close ideas to such implicit theories telling that "who knows can teach" and "what teacher needs is authority". These are theories of someone looking at the educational system from far above.

4. The publication of the "Manifest"

It was on this scenario that the "Manifest for the Republic Education" appeared, through the *medium* of the *media*, that's to say, the World Wide Web. It is a short and simple text, with 736 words in 80 lines, full of grandiloquent and supposedly "consensual" statements about the assumedly catastrophic state of education.

We confirm this first impression making use of a content analysis on this text, picking up as many as the following expressions:

- a) Expressions with negative shade (*not being able...*, *has not followed that example...*, *we didn't manage...*, *doesn't give the Portuguese...*, *that isn't true...*, *the worst results...*, *is badly educating...*);
- b) Expressions that give an idea of disorientation (*Portugal is withdrawing...* *runs the risk of loosing...* *anxiety...*);

- c) Expressions that give the idea of waste or calamity (*wasting an opportunity...*, *has discredited the true democracy ...*, *the demolishing of great expectations ...*);
- d) Negative adjectives (*more apparent than real...*, *very deficient education...*, *undue reference...*, *irrational system of management...*, *defrauded...*, *ceptical...*);
- e) Nouns with negative shade (*web of interests...*, *school abandoning...*, *ignorance...*, *demagogy...*, *selfishness...*, *irrationalities...*, *indiscipline...*, *irresponsibility...*).

The plea to the Republic, as the whole set of citizens, and the President results from this scenario of calamity in order to prepare all the Portuguese for the “*urgent battle of education*”.

The text essentially redeems the epic style used by the pioneers of schooling when passionately calling everyone to the universal right to education or showing them the advantages of this right to the motherland in general. Just to have an idea, we can see the way Condorcet, in April 1792, addressed to the national assembly emerged from the French Revolution:

“Messieurs, offrir à tous les individus de l’espèce humaine les moyens de pourvoir à leurs besoins, d’assurer leur bien-être, de connaître et d’exercer leurs droits, d’entendre et de remplir leurs devoirs; assurer à chacun d’eux la facilité de perfectionner son industrie, de se rendre capable des fonctions sociales auxquelles il a droit d’être appelé, de développer toute l’étendue des talents qu’il a reçus de la nature, et par-là établir entre les citoyens une égalité de fait, et rendre réelle l’égalité politique reconnue par la loi: Tel doit être le premier but d’une instruction nationale; et, sous ce point de vue, elle est pour la puissance publique un devoir de justice”.

The same style was used by an article published in 1910 (year of the institution of the Portuguese Republic) as shown by the following passage:

“The republic has an urgent and sacred duty to fulfil: stimulate the development of the instruction actively. Because it’s through the instruction the nations become noble, great and rich... The Republican State needs quite a new

education to create a republican soul in the new generations (J. Magalhães, 1910).

And we can revisit this very same grandiloquent style in certain extracts of the present Manifest like the following one:

“Portugal is living a time of worry due to the ruining of great national expectations. The Portuguese have thought – this dream has been nourished! – they could access to the high civilisation standards of the most developed countries in Europe without any effort. When they see it’s not true, they feel defrauded and sceptical”.

This epic style can be found again in the appealing of the Manifest to the mobilisation of the country to the great battle:

“[...] it’s urgent to mobilise the institutions and the citizens to the great battle for an educational system that contributes for the progress of Portuguese society. In particular, it’s necessary to mobilise the elites, calling the Portuguese brought up in educational settings of greater intellectual and professional demands who will surely be able and motivated to give their contribution to the decisive effort that can make Portugal an informed, qualified and enterprising community”.

This short paragraph, contrasting to a first part painted with dark colours, is full of expressions conferring a positive dynamic (ex.: *mobilise...*, *great battle...*, *contribute...*, *progress...*, *elites...*, *brought up...*, *greater intellectual and professional demands...*, *surely able and motivated ...*, *contribution...*, *decisive effort...*, *informed, qualified and enterprising community*).

From the top of its simplistic “iluminism”, the Manifest claims for the closing of ranks against the darkness that is the trick of the welfare access without efforts, appealing for the contrary: the light coming from the immediate and long-duration causality established between the educational system and sacrifice on the one hand, and the happiness on the other. It calls for the mobilisation of the elites who are “*the Portuguese brought up in educational settings of greater intellectual and professional demands*”, eventually abroad, what will make them close to the keys of paradise through a regenerated educational system.

But the Manifest doesn’t take a word trying to explain, or at least understand, the intricate complexity of the profound reasons that have been taking our schools and other

countries' schools to the results that are now being known. It doesn't open a debate to the experts' contribution either: it limits to collect signatures from "unsatisfied" citizens (16,896 was the number registered in www.assinar.net last time we consulted it on the 25th April) in order to use it as a proof for the credibility of their point of view.

As it is obvious, the Manifest is nothing but a pamphlet whose target is simply intended to be the emotion. May be because this is not to be revealed, the appealing to the mobilisation of the emotiveness is disguised with the mention of "*national and international studies*" (not exactly determined) to give the Manifest a scientific seriousness tone from where it says:

"Every national and international study on the education of the Portuguese comes to the incontestable conclusion that the Republic is badly educating its children."

With the deduction:

"This is the fundamental reason why the Portuguese go on not being able to produce the resources they consume."

Or, what sounds worst, the reason why

"Portugal is getting away from the civilisation patterns of the countries we have decided to share a common future with."

But the mention of civilisation patterns of the most developed European countries bears a tragic irony because it was precisely in a standard country of those patterns that occurred on the 26th April 2002 the greatest tragedy in a school one has heard about until now, when a nineteen year boy, expelled from Gutenberg school in Erfurt, invaded it with fire weapons and killed seventeen people, committing suicide soon after.

But the Manifest is right when pointing out that:

"Concrete problems such as the objectives and the articulation between different teaching levels, the assessment of the performance of students, teachers and schools, the support to the students, the curricula and the courses and institutions accreditation, the academic and professional qualification, the initial and in-service education, the access to high education, the financing and management of schools and universities in particular, and the impact of the school in innovation and productiveness have to be faced together in a coherent way."

But it ignores that the inexorable lack of causality connection between school and development is not a consequence of the lack of coherence the way these problems are viewed. On the contrary, this set of problems is the result of the chaos installed in the system, at the exact extent the links of causality school-development are vanishing. It ignores school has become alienated from the moment its social role has started to be changed and as far as the several teaching levels were ceasing to be terminal. It ignores that today the school system at least plays two important and new roles with no direct relation to development at all: take care of children and adolescents while their parents are at work (storing function) and sustain in its interior and up to the utmost limit great masses of youngsters who would otherwise press the working market (shock-absorbing function). And it ignores these new functions are alienating ones, causing contradictions too difficult to be over passed, such as the one of maintaining through compulsory schooling thousands of students who don't see any use to stay on at school. Or the one of giving teachers "hidden" functions as those of "entertainers", not appearing in their working contracts.

Unfortunately the Manifest, in its simplistic grandiloquence, doesn't even try to stand back from the catastrophic discourse gradually introduced in the press as we've been seeing. When it affirms that:

"School has opened its doors to a greater number of children, as it is the role of a democratic regimen. But even that success is more apparent than real, since we are the country of the community with the greatest tax of school abandoning. On the other side, the students who resist against the school leave do have, in general, a very deficient education at too expensive prices. That makes Portugal one of the countries in the European Union spending proportionally the most with education and having the worst results at the same time. This way, the improvement of economic and social conditions we succeeded to create in very favourable conditions is running the risk to be lost, wasting an opportunity that will very hardly appear again."

Without clarifying this statement, the Manifest seems to directly charge the teachers and their education imbricated by the educational sciences with the responsibility of a "very deficient education" and "at too expensive prices". In fact, along the text, there are recurrent expressions coming from areas of management and economy characteristic of

neo-liberal and conservative policies (ex.: *they go on not being able to produce the resources they consume ...*, *a very deficient education at too expensive prices...*, *spending proportionally the most with education ...*, *economic conditions...*, *great economic space...*, *levels of development...*, *a wealthier country...*, *progress...*). Moreover it is not quite clear what “*too expensive*” prices mean, nor the role of demography for the estimation of those costs. It’s obvious it’s quite different to spend x in a country with y millions of elderly population, and spend the same amount in a country with an equivalent but much younger population consequently with greater taxes of schooling (will it not be the case of Portugal?).

May be the message intended to convey is the idea of total privatisation of education in Portugal, according to the neo-liberal thesis that the State is by nature “expensivist” and only the private entities do have the notion of how much it costs and how necessary it is to spare, just because they administrate their own capital and not the money from the tax payers: so privatisation is supposed to instil the educational system with the idea of rentability the Manifest absolutely doesn’t recognise the State has.

In conclusion, the “Manifest for the Republic Education”, whatever goals it may have saying what it said, is far from being a useful element for the discussion about evaluating either education system or teacher education system. It may perhaps give another pretext to feed the soft flame of an illuminated defeatism normally used by solemn speeches more or less lazily assuming high purposes never to be accomplished. Or it probably appears to make choir with current and superficial opinion for immediate consumption and soon out of memory... We think the evaluation of both education and teacher education systems, despite the obligation of being open to the contribution and participation of the society in general, has to abstain either from the yoke of prejudice or the enthusiasm of sensationalism. And these ballasts weight too much in this Manifest. That’s why we think it has to be faced as a mere fugacious episode, like a meteor shooting in the sky that soon turns dark again as if nothing had occurred.

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