Handbook of Social Justice in Education

William Ayers, Therese Quinn, David Stovall

Creating Local Democracy, Nurturing Global Alternatives

Publication details
Luis Armando Gandin
Published online on: 17 Dec 2008

Accessed on: 22 Nov 2023

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The Case of the Citizen School Project in Porto Alegre, Brazil

Luis Armando Gandin

When talking about the experiences of participatory democracy in the city of Porto Alegre, and more specifically about the World Social Forum and the World Education Forum held in that city for some years, the Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos would say that the Forum and the Porto Alegre experiences were not antiglobalization initiatives but rather a form of “globalization from below” (Santos, 1995). This chapter will show an educational reform that did not have the intention of becoming a global experience but rather a local progressive alternative to market-based educational policies. Nevertheless, because of its innovations in terms of access to schools, curriculum, and educational governance, it has achieved (together with other local participatory democracy initiatives) a high degree of global interest. According to Michael Apple, in a lecture at the 2004 World Education Forum, Porto Alegre, being the “city of the Citizen School and the Participatory Budgeting,” can “teach the world how to stop neoliberalism and neoconservativism” (World Education Forum, 2004). The World Social Forum and the World Education Forum (spaces created to think about alternatives to neo-liberalism in economy, culture, social life, and education) started in the city of Porto Alegre exactly because of the policies implemented by the local government.

The goal of this chapter is to describe and analyze the Citizen School project, the urban educational reform implemented in Porto Alegre, and its potential global lessons from the South.

Contextualizing the Citizen School Project

Porto Alegre is a city of almost 1.4 million people, situated in the southern region of Brazil. It is the capital of the state of Rio Grande do Sul and the largest city of the region. From 1989 to 2004, it was governed by a coalition of leftist parties (the Popular Administration), under the general leadership of the Workers’ Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores or PT, formed in 1979 by a coalition of unions, social movements, and other leftist organizations). The Popular Administration was reelected three consecutive times, thus giving it and its policies even greater legitimacy. Despite the recent electoral loss that replaced PT in 2005 after 16 years in the municipal administration, the basic structures of the project are still in place. The fact that the winning coalition of parties (a centrist alliance) had to promise not to change the major set of policies put in place by the PT government in order to be elected, is a clear indicator of how organic these policies became in the daily life of Porto Alegre’s citizens.

The Citizen Schools are almost exclusively located in the favelas of Porto Alegre, serving a population that lives in extreme poverty. A significant number of schools were built as a concrete result of the Participatory Budgeting process (part of the participatory democracy structures created by the Popular Administration, where delegates vote
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A number of neighborhoods prioritized the construction of schools in their assemblies. The fact that the schools were constructed in those neighborhoods is both a victory of the organization of those communities and a political commitment of the Popular Administration.

The Citizen School project was constructed explicitly as an alternative to the global marketization ideology around education—one that claims that education should operate as a market—and it is clear that the notion of citizenship was used overtly as a way of opposing the process that views knowledge as a commodity and students as consumers. The goal of the Citizen School project is to create citizens, which are defined as the ones who have material goods necessary for survival, symbolic goods necessary for their subjectivity, and political goods necessary for their social existence (Azevedo, 1999, p. 16).

Constructing the Project

An important contribution of the Citizen School project to the idea of a participatory democracy is the way its principles were created. In order to decide on the goals and principles of the municipal schools a democratic, deliberative, and participatory forum was created called the School Constituent Project. This project was constituted through a long process of mobilization of the school communities (using the invaluable lessons learned in the mobilization for the Participatory Budgeting), and it had the goal of generating the principles that would guide the policy for the municipal schools in Porto Alegre.

The process of organization of the School Constituent Project took a good deal of time. The whole process lasted 18 months, and involved thematic groups in the schools, regional meetings, and eventually the Constituent Assembly. The themes that guided the discussion were school governance, curriculum, principles for living together, and evaluation. The Constituent Assembly elected the radical democratization of the education in the municipal schools as the main normative goal of the Citizen School project. This radical democratization would have to occur in three dimensions: democratization of access to school, democratization of knowledge, and democratization of governance. These three principles would be the ones guiding every action in the municipal system of Porto Alegre. These three principles would have the impact of changing the structure of the schools and of the relationship between schools and the SMED.

Democratization of Access to Schools

If the schools were to have an impact on the lives of the children living in the most impoverished neighborhoods of Porto Alegre—where the municipal schools are situated—initial access to schools had to be a priority. For the Popular Administration, guaranteeing this access was, therefore, the first step to promoting social justice to communities historically excluded from social goods.

Granting access to all children of school age is not as easy as it might sound. Historically, Brazil has had an enormous number of children who did not attend school. National statistics show that this has been changing rapidly, but in 1991, when the Popular Administration was just starting, and even in 1994, when the Citizen School project had only been in existence for one year, the situation was grave in terms of initial access to schooling. Almost 17% of the Brazilian children of school age were not being formally educated in 1991; in 1994 this number had dropped to almost 13%.

When the Workers’ Party was elected in 1988, the city of Porto Alegre had only 19 primary (K–8) schools (“fundamental education,” as it is called in Brazil), with 14,838
students and 1,698 teachers, curriculum coordinators, and educational supervisors. Under the Popular Administration the number of students grew at a remarkable rate. Between 1988 and 2000, the number of students in fundamental education increased by 232%. This number shows how profound the impact of the actions of the SMED has been in Porto Alegre, and, although the comparison is not between equal circumstances, it is worth pointing out that between 1991 and 1998 the number of school-age children in Brazil increased by only 22.3% (Sistema de informações, pesquisas e estatísticas educacionais [INEP], 2000, p. 53).

The number of fundamental education schools increased by 126% under the Popular Administration government (and if we consider all the schools under the municipal government—including the schools geared toward early childhood, adolescents and young adults, and special education—the rate of increase is actually 210%). It is important to point out again that these schools were all constructed in very impoverished areas of the city and that the majority of new schools were actually built inside or around favelas. This means that the schools are not only bringing back students who drop out of state schools, but they are also creating a space for many children who have never attended school and possibly never would have were it not for the new municipal schools.

But guaranteeing initial access to school does not guarantee that these children will benefit from school. In order to really democratize the access to schools, in 1995 the SMED started to propose a new organization for the municipal schools. Instead of keeping the traditional structure of grades with the duration of one year (first to eighth in fundamental education), the idea was to adopt a new structure called Cycles of Formation. It is important to note that the idea of reorganizing the curriculum and the space-time of the schools in cycles instead of grades does not originate in Porto Alegre. What the Citizen School was implementing was not new per se, but a new configuration that, according to the SMED, would offer a substantially better opportunity for dealing with the need for democratization of access and knowledge.

In this new configuration, the traditional deadline—the end of each academic year—when the students had to “prove” that they had “learned,” was eliminated in favor of a different time organization. The establishment of the cycles is a conscious attempt to eliminate the mechanisms in schools that perpetuate exclusion, failure, and dropouts, as well as the blaming of the victim that accompanies these. The idea is that by using a different conception of the equation learning/time, the Citizen School would not punish students for allegedly being “slow” in their process of learning.

The schools now had three cycles of three years each, something that adds one year to the “fundamental education” (one year of early childhood education inside the schools, expanding “fundamental education” to nine years). This made the municipal schools responsible for the education of kids from 6 to 14 years old. The three cycles are organized based on the cycles of life: each one corresponds to one phase of development (i.e., childhood, preadolescence, and adolescence). The idea is to group together students of the same age in each of the years of the three cycles. This aims at changing the reality in the majority of public schools that cater to popular classes in Brazil and the one the SMED was faced with when the Popular Administration started to govern the city: students with multiple failures (and therefore much older) inside classrooms intended for much younger children. By having students of the same age in the same year of the cycle, the SMED claims to remotivate the kids who have failed multiple times.

In the schools using these cycles, students progress from one year to another within one cycle; the notion of “failure” is eliminated. Despite this victory, the SMED understood that the elimination of mechanisms of exclusion was not enough to achieve the goal of democratization of knowledge. Because of this, the Citizen School created several
mechanisms that aim at guaranteeing the inclusion of students. It established Progression Groups for the students that have discrepancies between their age and what they have learned. The idea is to provide students who have experienced multiple failures in the past with a stimulating and challenging environment where they can learn at their own pace and fill the gaps in their academic formation that exist because of the multiple failures they have experienced. Furthermore, the Progression Groups are also a space for the students who come from other school systems (from other city or state schools, for example) and have experienced multiple failures to be given more close attention so that they are ultimately integrated into the cycles, according to their age. The idea here is that the school has to change its structure to adapt to the students, and not the reverse, which has been historically the case (Souza et al., 1999, pp. 24–25).

This idea of constructing a new structure to better respond to students’ needs led to the creation of another entity: the Learning Laboratory. This is a space where students with more serious learning problems get individual attention, but also a place where teachers conduct research in order to improve the quality of the regular classes. For the students with special needs, there are the Integration and Resources Rooms, which “are specially designed spaces to investigate and assist students who have special needs and require complementary and specific pedagogic work for their integration and for overcoming their learning difficulties” (SMED, 1999a, p. 50).

With all these mechanisms, the Citizen School project not only grants initial access, but also intends to guarantee that the educational space occupied by the subaltern children is one that treats them with the dignity, respect, and quality necessary to keep them in the school and educate them to be real citizens.

Democratization of Knowledge

Curriculum transformation is a crucial part of Porto Alegre’s project to build active citizenship. It is important to say that this dimension is not limited to access to traditional knowledge. What is being constructed is a new epistemological understanding about what counts as knowledge as well. It is not based on a mere incorporation of new knowledge within the margins of an intact “core of human wisdom,” but a radical transformation. The Citizen School project goes beyond the mere episodic mentioning of cultural manifestations or class, racial, sexual, and gender-based oppression. It includes these themes as an essential part of the process of construction of knowledge.

In the Citizen School project, the notion of “core” and “periphery” in knowledge is made problematic. The starting point for the construction of curricular knowledge is the culture(s) of the communities themselves, not only in terms of content, but in terms of perspective as well. The whole educational process is aimed at inverting previous priorities and instead serving the historically oppressed and excluded groups. The starting point for this new process of knowledge construction is the idea of thematic complexes. This organization of the curriculum has the whole school working on a central generative theme in an interdisciplinary effort, whereby the disciplines and areas of knowledge will structure the focus of their content.

The schools are encouraged to follow steps for the construction of the thematic complex and for the translation of the macrodiscussions into curriculum. These steps involve acknowledging and studying the context where the school is situated, through participatory research conducted by the school collective in the community, selecting statements gathered in the research that are significant and representative of the aspirations, interests, conceptions, and cultures of the community, and elaborating principles that can guide the curriculum building process in the school.
The thematic complex provides the whole school with a central focus that guides the curriculum of that school for a period of time that can be one semester or an entire academic year. After having the principles—the larger contribution of each knowledge area for the discussion of the thematic complex—and the conceptual matrix—a web of concepts from the knowledge area, rather than isolated facts or information that the teachers understand are essential to use when dealing with the thematic complex—teachers have meetings organized by their knowledge areas and by each year in the cycles, to elaborate and plan the curriculum. Teachers have to “study” their own knowledge areas and elect the concepts that would help to problematize the thematic complex. They also have to work collectively with teachers of other areas in order to assemble a curriculum that is integrated and dense enough to simultaneously address the issues listed in the thematic complex.

Because the starting point for the thematic complex is popular knowledge or common sense, teachers are also forced to think about the relation between official knowledge and this common sense. Therefore, this approach deals simultaneously with three problems of traditional education: the fragmentation of knowledge, the “apparent” neutrality of school content, and the absolute supremacy that traditional schools grant to scientific/erudite knowledge over local community knowledge, especially very impoverished communities—as is the case in Porto Alegre.

The students are not studying history or social and cultural studies using books that never address their real problems and interests. Through the organization in thematic complexes, the students learn history by beginning with the historical experience of their families. They study important social and cultural content by focusing on and valorizing their own cultural manifestations. It is important to note that these students still learn the history of Brazil and the world, including the so-called high culture, but these will be seen through different lenses. Their culture will not be forgotten in order for them to learn “high status” culture. Rather, by understanding their situation and their culture and valuing it, these students will be able to simultaneously learn and will have the chance to transform their situation of exclusion. By studying the problems (rural exodus, living in illegal lots, etc.) and not stopping there, but studying the strengths of self-organization (in neighborhood associations and in cultural activities and groups), and connecting these issues to school knowledge such as geographical notions of space, historical events, mathematical competence, and many more, the Citizen School helps to construct real knowledge and alternatives for communities living in terrible conditions.

This shift of what is considered the core or the center of knowledge affects not only the pedagogical conception that guides the daily life in the classrooms; it also transforms how the school itself functions as a whole. This conception of knowledge now is spreading throughout the entire school system. The project not only serves the “excluded” by generating a different formal education for students, but also serves them by creating an innovative structure that makes it possible for the community of those who have historically been excluded to regain their dignity (both material and symbolic).

Democratization of Governance

The first mechanism that guarantees the democratization of governance is the Constituent Assembly. It not only provided a space to decide on the administration of the project, but also allowed for real participation in the definition of the goals of the Citizen School. Educational structures have, nevertheless, many levels of governance and democratization of these spaces demands the creation of new mechanisms.
Among the mechanisms created to democratize the governance of the educational system in Porto Alegre, the School Council is a central element. Its role is to promote the democratization of the decision-making process and governance in education in Porto Alegre. A product of the political will of the Popular Administration and the demands of social movements involved in education in the city, the school councils, established by a municipal law in December of 1992 and implemented in 1993, are the most important institutions in the schools. They are formed by elected teachers, school staff, parents, students, and by one member of the administration, and they have consultive, deliberative, and monitoring functions.

The task of the school council is to deliberate about the global projects for the school, the basic principles of administration, to allocate economic resources, and to monitor the implementation of the decisions. The principal and her or his team are responsible for the implementation of these policies defined by the school council.

In terms of resources, it is important to say that, before the Popular Administration took office, there was a practice (common in Brazil) of a centralized budget. Every expense (even the daily ones) had to be sent to the central administration before it was approved, and then, the money was sent to the school, or a central agency would purchase the product or the service necessary. In such a system, the school council would have “their hands tied,” with no autonomy at all. The SMED changed this structure and established a new policy to make the amount of money available to each school every three months. According to the SMED, this was the measure that instituted the financial autonomy of the schools, which allowed the schools to manage their expenditures according to the goals and priorities established by the school council. At the same time that it creates autonomy, this measure gives parents, students, teachers, and staff who are present in the council a notion of social responsibility in administering public money, and it teaches them to hierarchize the investments with solidarity in mind (SMED, 1999b).

The school council also has the power to monitor the implementation, through the principal and her or his team, of its decisions (SMED, 1993, p. 3). In fact, the school council is an empowered structure in the schools. It is the main governance mechanism inside the schools, and its limitations are only the legislation and the policy for education collectively constructed in democratic forums. Decisions about the curriculum can be part of the deliberation, and the inclusion of parents, students, and staff (or even teachers, if we consider the traditional school) in this process is a great innovation of the model.

Along with the school council, another mechanism guarantees democratic spaces in the Citizen School: in the municipal schools of Porto Alegre, the whole school community elects the principal by direct vote. The one responsible for the implementation of the decisions of the school council, that is, the principal, is her- or himself elected after defending a particular project of administration for the school. There is a legitimacy that comes from this fact. The principal is not someone that necessarily represents the interests of the central administration inside the school councils, but someone that was voted by a majority of supporters inside that particular educational community. Principals have a great degree of embeddedness and, because of this, the SMED feels that it is possible to avoid the potential problem of having someone responsible for the concretization of the deliberations occurring in the school councils who is not connected with the project. But the responsibility of the community does not stop there: through the school council, the school community has a way of monitoring the activities of the principal and holding her or him responsible for implementing its democratic decisions.

The direct election of the one responsible for implementing the directives created by the school council, which is also elected directly by the school community, represents a
mechanism that aims at generating the principle of democratic management at the local school level.

Potential Problems

The Citizen School project represents a clear advance toward the democratization of access to schools, of knowledge, and of governance. Nevertheless, as any other reform, it faces challenges that have to be addressed if the project wants to remain democratic and a viable progressive alternative to current conservative reforms.

The cycles represent an advance in the right direction: they allow students to stay in school, thereby combating the serious problem of dropouts. However, in order for them to provide students with continuous evaluation of their work, all the mechanisms created must be in place. This means that the new supporting structures (the close assessment of students’ progress, the Learning Laboratories, etc.) must be in place. In times of budget constraints, these tend to be the first structures to be cut back. In a school that eliminated grade failure, the close monitoring of student progress and the supporting structures have to be there, otherwise there is a good chance students will not get the academic skills they need to continue their education. This is a serious issue and there are signs that some teachers are starting to doubt the universal elimination of grade failure, which could end up recreating the grade mentality in a cycle structure.

Another potential problem of the Citizen School project is related to the issue of class. The Workers Party has historically had its roots in a Marxist understanding of the primacy of class. Parts of the Marxist tradition have been accused (correctly, we think, in many cases) of choosing class as not just the central, but often the only, category of analysis, thus subordinating other forms of oppression to class (see Apple, 1988; Apple & Weis, 1983). Thus, in the material produced by the Popular Administration there are several explicit references to class oppression—and rightly so; but there are fewer references to racial or gender oppression. This could potentially lead to a position that ignores the specificities of oppressions other than those that are class-based. There are, therefore, reasons to believe that there are open spaces for popular organizations, such as the growing activist movement among Afro-Brazilians, women’s social movements, and gay and lesbian organizations, to operate and demand from the educational state agencies the inclusion of issues that should be part of the agenda of every citizen who fights oppression, at either a local or global level.

In terms of the governance structures, a special attention has to be directed at the school councils. In the schools, there are different interests at play and, more importantly there is a specific technical knowledge that only teachers possess. When decisions in the school council, involve themes where this technical knowledge is part of the issue, teachers tend to have an important advantage. Therefore, in the decisions that involve pedagogical issues, parents may feel that they do not have the language or the convincing capability that teachers have because when teachers talk, they do it with a jargon that is often unfamiliar to the parents. There is certainly a learning process that will have to take place in the school councils. The technical knowledge that teachers have will eventually be faced with responses and arguments of those who will have learned how to better propose ideas and how to fight for the interest of parents. One of the great challenges for the Citizen School project is to intensify and extend the already existent process of education of parents in terms of what constitutes their rights and their space in the school. It requires the creation of a space where parents feel welcomed, where their knowledge about the community and their children is respected and valued as knowledge necessary to create better schools, and where parents get the discursive and intellectual
tools to discuss these issues with teachers in a democratic manner. This process also has to involve educating teachers, people who had historically to get used to making all the decisions. Teachers and administrators will have to learn from the communities how to listen and how to establish a level of trust where parents feel that they do not need to use a specific jargon to be heard.

Finally, the fact that the PT is not in power in Porto Alegre represents a challenge to the integrity of the experience. Even with the current administration embracing some of the core principles of the Citizen School experience, there are fears that the grade failure might be reintroduced, representing a serious threat to the principles of the experience. Nevertheless, the fact that the main mechanisms are still in place after two years, might teach us something about the importance of making new understandings about education engrained in the school and community culture. The state was the agency that initiated the process of change, but the continuation of the changes does not depend on the state. The fact that they remained even after a new administration tells us something about the strength and the level of embeddedness of the Citizen School in Porto Alegre.

Local Action: Global Reach

Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of the project is the fact that the Citizen School project and the Popular Administration as a whole have been establishing connections between the educational process of the city as a whole, not only with local issues and progressive initiatives, but also with global movements.

Since January of 2001, Porto Alegre has been hosting the World Social Forum and the World Education Forum. The city administration has paid part of the costs and provided the infrastructure for the meetings and assemblies. The World Social Forum was conceived of as a space for exchanging experiences and building networks of collaboration among counterhegemonic movements around the world and building what Santos and others have called “globalization from below” (Evans, 2000; Santos, 1995).

The first World Social Forum, in January of 2001, had 4,000 delegates from various countries of the world. The second forum, also held in Porto Alegre in January of 2002, attracted 15,000 delegates from 131 countries and 25,000 more people who participated without registering (Whitaker, 2002). There were also 1,500 journalists officially registered to cover the event (Klein, 2001). The third forum, again in Porto Alegre, had nearly 100,000 participants (20,000 delegates, 25,000 participants in the Youth Camp, 4,000 journalists plus nearly 50,000 general audience) (World Social Forum, 2003). In 2004 the organizers decided to have the Forum in India. In 2005 the World Social Forum returned to Porto Alegre with 155,000 registered participants.

The organization that the Popular Administration and the SMED are promoting with the World Social Forum and the World Education Forum are the attempt to build what Evans (2000) calls “transnational networks” (p. 230). In this sense, the experiences of Porto Alegre may also have considerable importance not only for Brazil, but also for people who are deeply concerned about the effects of the neoliberal and neoconservative restructuring of education and of the public sphere in general and struggle for finding alternatives. There seems to be a great deal to be learned from the successful alternative-creation and from the challenges and contradictions encountered by the Citizen School project.

Hosting events like the World Social Forum and the World Education Forum are a great step towards the construction of a “language of translation,” or a step toward building a new common sense around education and creating alternative models, not only locally but also on a global scale (Pedroni & Gandin, 2007). With schools that
dramatically improve access and decrease dropout rates, with a curriculum that challenges what knowledge should be taught, and with democratic governance structures that stimulate participation and community involvement, the Citizen School project can provide a concrete example of alternative to reforms based on the introduction of markets as the ultimate arbiters.

Perhaps the greatest lesson is the fact that the Citizen School project is coherently linked to larger dynamics of social transformation and to a coherent set of practices that aim to change the mechanisms of the state and the rules of participation in the formation of state policies. All of this has crucial implications for how we might think about the politics of education policy and its role in social transformation. Being formed by schools that center their life on how to address exclusion and how to create state policies that address this exclusion (avoiding “quick fixes”), the Citizen School project represents a real life experience of how difficult it is to construct radical democracy. The accomplishments and the challenges created by the experience are lessons to be learned not only by the citizens of Porto Alegre, but also by global citizens struggling for local and global transformations in their locales.

Notes

1. The PT loss in Porto Alegre has been attributed by many to a decline in middle class support of the municipal administration. The current administration was elected in a runoff election with 57% of the votes (the PT candidate received the remaining 43% of the votes).

References


