

Parent-School Partnership and the *NCLB* Act: A Foucauldian Approach

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I. INTRODUCTION

In 2002 the administration of George W. Bush passed the *No Child Left Behind* Act (NCLB). This was a highly standard-based educational reform which aspired to respond to every child's educational needs and was in a large degree a reaction to the 'apparent underachievement of American schools, particularly with regard to their relative performance in international comparative tests' (Schmidt et al., 1999, cited in: Smith, 2005, p. 508).

The 2002 Act considered parents' involvement vital for their children's educational progress and for this reason encouraged the formation of successful parent-school partnerships (*Parental Involvement*, 2004, Title I, Part A, Non-Regulatory Guidance¹).

In what follows, I will try to question the notion of parent-school partnership and approach it from a Foucauldian perspective. This means that I will try to detect how this kind of civil participation on behalf of the parents is enmeshed in power relations and governmental techniques for self regulation. More specifically I will use the notion of governmentality to explain how the *NCLB* Act conditions partnership in such a way that in certain cases is destined to fail.

II. PARENTS AND SCHOOLS AS PARTNERS

In any psychological approach, be it Vygotskian, Piagetian or other, there is an emphasis on the environment's potential influence on the child's development. More particularly, within Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems approach, family and school are interconnecting systems and the interrelationships among them determine in a large degree the quality of the child's life (Shea and Bauer, 1994).

Parent-school partnership, however, is not a mere relationship between people; it is also a socio-political activity since citizens are offered the opportunity to interact and even inflict changes to a public institution (Vincent and Tomlinson, 1997). It is in fact recorded that since the 1970, several U.K. official documents and policies, such as the *Community Development* project (Bennington, 1997, cited in: Vincent and Tomlinson, 1997, p. 362), aspire to promote 'citizen participation' as a means for underprivileged people's active involvement with society.

What is extremely interesting, though, is the fact, that parents are considered the

disadvantaged group who has to struggle against the all-knowing educational experts, even in cases that they are openly invited to participate in the educational process.

Will Cowburn describes this complex relationship as follow:

Parents were once kept out of schools so as to allow professionals uninterrupted control; parents are now being encouraged to get involved and come into schools so they can understand why the professional exercises control in the manner he/she does. The basis line remains intact, but its preservation is achieved by methods opposite to those which had been used (Cowburn, 1986, p. 18, cited in: Vincent and Tomlinson, 1997, p. 366).

Similarly, Crozier who researched the 'educational experiences of . . . African Caribbean and "mixed race" young people from the perspectives of their parents', found out that '(p)arents felt that teachers and the school had considerable power over their children' (Crozier, 2005, p. 585). More specifically, one mother in this research stated that: 'at the end of the day they (*teachers*) are in control of our children . . . and they can make them or break them' (*ibid.*).

Even though, there is this constant reference to the schema of the powerful teacher and the powerless parent, it is easily understood that the problem does not exhaust itself in the dynamics of this complex relationship, since the relationship itself is conditioned more by 'governing agencies and authorities' than the interest groups themselves (Dean, 1999, p. 10).

In the following paragraphs I will attempt to explain what I mean by *government* and *governmentality* and then I will associate these notions with the parents' role in the *NCLB* Act.

III. PARTNERSHIP AS GOVERNMENTALITY

Dean considers government as 'an intensely moral activity' since it can be understood 'as the attempt to make oneself accountable for one's own actions, or as a practice in which human beings take their own conduct to be subject to self-regulation' (Dean, 1999, p. 11). With this definition the 'governing bodies presume to know . . . what constitutes good, virtuous, appropriate, responsible conduct of individuals and collectives' and they 'reward those who "perform certain tasks" with "social benefits"' (p. 12).

By the same token, the term governmentality refers to 'a certain form of the exercise of power' on people's actions, but what differentiates it from government is the fact that people are considered free in this process, since it is actually them who choose to exercise power over their own behavior. Foucault considers 'this second form of the exercise of power . . . as the act of subjectivation, an act whereby a human being turns herself into a subject' (Masschelein and Quaghebeur, 2005, p. 54).

However, as Judith Butler points out, the subject can never be fully free in assuming an identity since the process of 'subjectivation' happens always within 'a moral and ethical framework' where the subject is 'under the authority of another' (p. 55). This *other* refers to society, societal mores, legislations, educational policies, etc.

In the paper titled 'Participation for better or for Worse?' Masschelein and Quaghebeur (2005) investigate how children's active participation in their education can turn out to be an

incident of subjectivation instead of a path towards emancipation and democratic citizenship. In fact, they argue that the discourse of participation exercises ‘a strongly prescriptive appeal to subjects within education. This means that without there being any overt obligation or direct impositions’ people are directed ‘to behave as participants, to present and shape themselves as participants and also to consider and approach others as such’ (pp. 55–56). This, of course, happens without coercion, but with the promise that in acting in a certain way and in assuming a certain identity the subject becomes free and empowered (Masschelein and Quaghebeur, 2005).

In the same way, I will argue that parents are encouraged to become a certain kind of subject or partner under the implementation of the *NCLB* Act and this does not result always in a beneficiary and just experience. In order to make this clear I will first comment on the structure and some of the first results of the implementation of the 2002 law and then give some examples of how parental participation is conditioned by it.

IV. THE NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND ACT

As I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the *NCLB* Act aspires to ensure progress for every child in the American educational system. This is supposed to be monitored by specific tests. More specifically the Act requests that:

all school and school districts which receive Title-1 federal funding (and this refers to schools in underprivileged areas) put into place a set of standards for improving students’ achievement, together with detailed plans charting how these standards will be monitored and met (Smith, 2005, p. 508).

The Act states also that through yearly assessments in language arts and mathematics for Grades 3–8 and additional assessments in science for Grades 10–12, ‘States must . . . indicate how both schools and school districts will reach Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) towards full proficiency by 2014 and make public their results’ (pp. 508–509). What is more, the schools that will fail to reach these standards will undergo severe sanctions, the harshest of them being the school’s closure.

The law’s high standards and severe consequences in case of failure are supposed to be what ensure high performance and children’s success. However, it is worth mentioning, that despite the Act’s sensitivity to special subgroups of children, that ‘are characterized by students’ sex, minority group, Special Educational Need, level of economic disadvantage, and English language deficiency’ (p. 509) the early results of its implementation suggest that the schools that are most likely to fail are the schools whose population consists for the most part of these specific subgroups (Smith, 2005).

This potential outcome is particularly alarming if we consider that it is specifically the parents of these underprivileged groups of children that are considered most in need to participate in parent-school partnerships and adopt specific partner identities, since this suggest that these parents are encouraged to empower themselves and then fail. In the last sections of this paper I

will explain exactly how the role of partner is conceived for parents in an official U.S.A. government's document called: *Parental Involvement: Title I, Part A, Non-Regulatory Guidance Booklet of the Department of Education*.

V. SHARED ACCOUNTABILITY

As it is stated from the first page of the *Parental Involvement Booklet* certain provisions of the law 'stress shared accountability between schools and parents for high student achievement' (*Parental Involvement*, 2004, p. 1). The way for this to happen is by 'building parents' capacity for using effective practices to improve their own children's academic achievement' (ibid.).

In the D-8 paragraph titled 'Shared Responsibility for High Student Academic Achievement' it is mentioned that in order for this 'shared responsibility to exist' a 'school-parent' compact should be signed by the school, parents and children. 'The compact outlines the activities that the parents, school staff, and students will undertake to build and develop a partnership to help children achieve to the State's high academic standards' (p. 24).

In this compact parents mention what their responsibilities will be in order to promote their children education. With this technique, it could be said, that a kind of an empowered partner is promoted since a parent is enabled to participate in the decision making process regarding their child, volunteer in their child classroom and utter their opinion in policy making comities.

On the other hand, this kind of compact can be viewed as a surveillance technique since it extends school's disciplinary powers to the everyday environment of the house where the parent's role is by and large one of monitoring the child while he/she must give an account even for the child's extracurricular time.

Actually, Vincent and Tomlinson argue that parent-school partnership is often realized in such a way that 'the concept is increasingly used to justify mechanisms, such as home-school contracts, which seem to control the behaviour of parents and their children' (Vincent and Tomlinson, 1997, p. 361).

This realisation suggests that this kind of agreement between parents and school constitutes a technique to govern the parents, the children and the whole family structure. More over, the situation is intensified when the parents are not considered worthy partners, as I will be explaining next.

VI. PARENTS' CAPACITY FOR INVOLVEMENT

In paragraph E-1 it is mentioned that Local Educational Authorities and schools 'must ensure effective involvement of parents and support a partnership among the school, the parents, and the community to improve student academic achievement through training, information, and coordination activities' (*Parental Involvement*, 2004, p. 26).

In this context, parents should be informed about basic parameters of the law such as the academic standards and the methods of parental involvement. In cases however, where the parents lack basic literacy abilities it is recommended that they should be trained while engaged

in ‘family literacy activities, including parenting education and educational services for adults who need improved literacy skills in order to support their children’s learning’ and encouraged to participate in ‘literacy programs that bond families around reading and using the public library’ (ibid.).

This kind of training, even though seems to resemble Freire’s understanding of adult education as an emancipatory process, indicates that a discourse of deficiency/capacity is in place, since some parents are not considered equal partners but potentially equal. This means that the parents’ wish to become partners is not enough. Some of these parents must work in order to become equal partners.

If now we consider that these parents might be the parents of the children of the subgroups that fail to meet the appropriate standards of yearly progress we can understand how the whole family could be considered as failing. The process of training might be necessary in these situations but instead of empowering could turn out to be traumatic for the parents ‘who feel patronized’ and might ‘permanently damage their confidence’ (Todd and Higgins, 1998, p. 235).

VII. PARTNERSHIP AND MEETING THE STANDARDS

At this point I hope that I have pointed out how parents’ participation as partners in parent-school partnerships can be seen as a case of governmentality since in this context parents choose to exercise control over their own behaviour and especially on their parenting skills in order to gain greater social benefits for their family and higher educational progress for their children.

More specifically, the parents whose children show evidence of English language deficiency are often the parents who come from different ethnic backgrounds and by choosing to adopt certain behaviors in order to respond to their role as partners end up subjugating their selves into the specific type of citizen governmental policies promote.

This could be argued is a gain for these parents and their families since in this way they are better integrated in the American society. However, their involvement in their children education, apart from driving them away from their own traditions and parental beliefs might lead them to severe disappointment since their efforts are to be evaluated by standardized tests that measure their children progress.

In this context parents’ training and educational progress is not considered an end of its own but an instrument towards the State’s and government’s goals. Parents whose children end up failing these tests, despite their own efforts, will just learn that they weren’t really powerful partners in reciprocal relationships and accept this failure as their own responsibility and thus fail to see the social parameters of this problem.

NOTE

1. Hereafter referred to as *Parental Involvement*.

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