The Ambiguous Meanings of Parental Engagement in the Reflexive Modernization Era: Parental Educational Initiatives in Poland

Marta Wiatr

Maria Grzegorzewska University
Warsaw, Poland

This paper lays down a discussion on the contribution of a group of parents who decide to abandon public education and create for their children new educational environments – here called quasi-schools. It focuses on the *engagement* category captured during analysis and its shifting meanings.

The theoretical elaboration draws on exploratory qualitative research that started in 2014 which aimed to explore the essence and basis of the phenomenon of exceptional parental activity. The research questions concerned the parents' actions themselves and the meanings given to these actions by the parents, as well as wider ideologies in which parental activities find their justification. Aside from the theoretical framework composed of social constructivism and poststructuralism, in this elaboration, the concept of reflexive modernization by Beck and Giddens was employed.

The research utilized the case study method with applied strategies of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz) and discourse analysis embedded in the sociology of knowledge (Keller). Interviews with e1even parents involved in quasi-schools were conducted and analyzed from bottom-up.

The analyses allow us to reconstruct the multifaceted meanings of parental engagement in late modernity as corresponding with ideals of strength, participation, democracy and empowerment on the one hand and endangerment on the other hand.

Keywords: parents' engagement; parents' involvement; quasi-schools; reflexive modernization; subpolitics.

Polish discourse about family and school cooperation is steeped in the instrumental-technical perception of parental involvement in a child's education (Wiatr, 2019b) both at the theoretical inquiry level as well as at the everyday school practice level. This approach to parents' involvement is focused on ways of winning parents over to collaboration with the school in accordance with the school's priorities and goals. It manifests the normative and uncritical way of promoting cooperation in specified and limited forms (e.g. Łobocki, 1985; Pietruszka, 2017). Because this way of thinking does not always meet the parents' expectations or needs, it results in tensions and frustrations on both sides.

This sense of incoherence is intensified by two socio-cultural currents. The one is the arising parental ideologies with "parental determinism" and "intensive parenting" at the forefront. The other are the debris of politico-economical processes of education decentralization and democratization emergent in the '80s and '90s such as formal parents' representations units – parents' councils. These processes and phenomena compose a backdrop for parental activities. The educational initiative, undertaken by Polish middle-class parents and citizens of large cities, seems to embody the engagement ideal. After a closer look, this vision of engagement becomes vague.

In this article, the parents' activity will be portrayed across the spectrum of instrumental involvement and participative engagement. I believe that a theory of reflexive modernization may help in understanding the parental

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Marta Wiatr, e-mail: mwiatr@aps.edu.pl

commitment and understand shifts in the meaning of parental engagement. Phenomena such as flexibility, individualization, secularization, rationalization, alternative lifestyles, uncertainty, and etc., seem to have an enormous impact on individuals' (a. o. parents') willingness and readiness to accept the risk of shaping children's educational paths. Some parents use cognitive reflexivity to break from conventional ways of acting and to transform habits and practices linked to their own child's education.

In the first sections, I will contrast the two concepts of parents' commitment to children's education: involvement and engagement. Against this backdrop, I will present the emergence of Polish quasi-schools and their broader social-political context. This will be followed by a research project presentation complemented by examples of analyses indicating the emanation of the *engagement* category. In the last two sections, I will consider a concept of reflexive modernization by Beck and Giddens (Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 1994) in examining the *engagement* category and understanding parents' educational decisions and activities such as reflexive modern practices and phenomena. In the end, I will bring a critical theoretical perspective to the concluding discussion.

Engagement vs Involvement

Although not all scholars make the distinction between involvement and engagement, I highlight the difference in modality between these two notions. In this context, involvement refers to activities and ways for a parent to interact with the school environment. It is considered to be a key to student's academic success and to school improvement (Barton, Drake, Perez, Louis, & George, 2004; Epstein, 2001). It portrays a school-driven way of home and school cooperation. School, being at the heart of activities leading to cooperation, is in a position to determine goals and assign tasks drawing from its priorities and needs (Ferlazzo, 2009). As long as parents adhere to the school's priorities, the family-school collaboration is considered to be appropriate. The teachers are experts who know best what is needed or required, and parents can take on the role of spectators (Pushor, 2012) or audience members. Parents' perspectives and diverse resources are

not recognized by the school and thus are overlooked. As I mentioned earlier, the main concern is to win parents over and induce them to internalize the goals and tasks indicated by teachers (e.g. homework, school conferences, etc.). As long as the main purpose of winning parents over is improving students' achievement and strengthening school programs and curriculum, the leverage of such cooperation incorporates instrumental-technocratic purposes. Such parental involvement programs rest on encouraging the parents to be active in order to provide advantages for their own child. Therefore, it remains within the reach of the individualistic approach.

Unlike involvement, engagement is deemed a process rather than a standalone activity or set of activities (Barton et al., 2004; Weiss, Lopez, & Caspe, 2018). It is defined as a dynamic, distributed and interactive process that parents go through to navigate barriers between home and school. Conjointly, it acknowledges that parents are not a homogenous group and thus the barriers are individually diverse due to parents' various social and cultural backgrounds. Engagement entails co-constructed, shared responsibility based on meaningful and situated participation nested in a system of comprehensive supports. It reaches beyond home and school activities towards diverse institutions operating in the neighborhood. Engagement is a parent-driven process and it involves their needs and priorities as well as their communities' priorities and resources (Weiss et al., 2018). The parents are active participants and partners. The school takes the adjunctive and supportive role. Parents engage because they feel challenged to do something about what they feel is important. The purposes of their activity go beyond solely supporting their children in school and extend to collaboration to transform the local community (Ferlazzo, 2009). Thus, the process develops participative, emancipatory, and empowering potential.

The spectrum between involvement and engagement seems to determine a course for Polish parents' educational initiative. The context of the initiative is shaped by the three phenomena and processes: decentralization and democratization of the Polish school system dating back to the '90s; parenting ideologies; and the sense of being trapped in 'involvement' mode.

Decentralization, neoliberal parenting and parental "encapsulation" experience

The emergence of the first quasi-schools incorporates a culmination of social-cultural processes and phenomena taking place throughout the last three decades in Polish society and its main structures including the educational system.

Decentralization and democratization processes in the educational system (including ideas of school autonomy and school accountability), has tangled with the neo-liberal parenting ideologies, and with simultaneous parents' experiences of being omitted both by school staff at a school level and by politicians at the national reform level. It has led to the emergence of new parental practices linked to children's education.

At the educational system level, the proceeding of decentralizations boiled down to handing over the state schools to local authorities (Levitas & Herczyński, 2002). In addition, the possibility of creating and running schools by other organizations (e.g. private) besides local authorities' units was allowed[1].

At the school level, the rules of co-managing the institution became regulated by establishing school stakeholders, including obligatory parents' councils and facultative school councils. They were ascribed certain limited competences[2]. At

this level, the school's democratization seemed to open a space for parents' presence and voice inviting them to partake in a responsibility for children's education through various forms of parental involvement in their learning (Śliwerski, 2015).

In the mid-'90s, decentralizing tendencies and school-improvement concepts had started to weave with the new powerful discourses of accountability for education and students' performances, educational standardization and parameterization[3]. They seemed to have their roots in marketization which was strengthening at the time in Poland (Rudnicki, 2012).

The social-cultural shift that happened during the politico-economic transformation process in Poland opened the field for parents to search for their own life projects, including those related to parenthood and a child's development. Expansive neoliberal parenting ideologies such as parents' determinism (Furedi, 2001, 2012) and intensive parenting (Hays, 1996) provided parents a new vision of their parental role. This also established visible shifts in the ways some parents started to construct their parental behavior. The parents received signals that the quality of their parenting determines the child's future happiness and wellbeing. Hence poor parenting was regarded as accountable for offspring's future failures. Coupled with the decentralization and democratization processes, neoliberal ideals of parenting brought about the parentocracy (Brown, 1990). The ideology of parentocracy allows parents freedom in their choice of their children's educational paths at the same time making them responsible for these choices. Parents, like customers in the free school market, choose schools or other educational settings, suitable to their needs and priorities. The schools selected by certain criteria are made accountable for fulfilling declarations made.

The third essential phenomenon combined in the background of quasi-school emergence was a mass experience of the unimportance of parents'

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[1] In the early 80' within the framework of the emerging Solidarność social movement, the ideas of school autonomy arose in Poland. Significant changes came about in the '90s, after political-economic transformation. Starting from 1990 the decentralization ideas were brought to the structure of national power. The Local Government Act dated to 8th of March 1990r. specified the tasks and obligations of the local authority which has been called to independently perform the tasks of public administration, and also equipped with material means enabling the implementation of its tasks. The Act of 7 September, on Education System indicated local authorities as a leading authority in organizing and carrying out educational tasks on the given territory. Besides the local authorities running public schools, the pronounced afore act expressed acceptance for other units – individuals, companies or associations for organizing and running non-public schools. It also provided the basis for non-public schools for applying for targeted subsidies from the state budget for scholarships and education of children, adolescents, and adults. The prior state monopoly for conducting universal education has been weakened.

[2] Due to the Act of 7 September 1991 on Education System and the later Act of 14 December 2016, the Law on School Education,

the parents' councils merely consult and evaluate school decisions.

[3] Decentralization from the beginning was split between pedagogical-political (participation, democratization) and economic (effectiveness and efficiency) goals. In Polish reality, it soon became clear that the economic goals became the leading ones within the ongoing processes (Uryga, 2018). This trend led to superficial participational and democratic changes in the school which resulted in making parents obligatory "partners" of the school. (Śliwerski, 2014; Uryga, 2018)

perspective both in a particular school and in a broader systemic perspective. The lack of space for parents' participation, other than the one limited to fulfilling the priorities determined by the school staff, was frustrating for many. It took the shape of encapsulation within parents' councils. Due to the limited competences of these councils, parents felt in fact cut off from the decisions being made in school. At the higher level, parents, who in public expressed their opinions and shared their ideas and felt manipulated and ignored by political parties. It became obvious that politicians have been using parental anger and determination solely to build advantages over their political adversaries (Mendel, 2018; Mendel & Wiatr, 2018). New institutional and political conditions created superficial participation, which pushed parents towards the position of clients or adherents, but not participants or partners.

Emergence of Quasi-Schools

In 2013 a group of Polish parents decided to take their children out of both private and public schools to create an educational environments for the children, in which they could develop and learn better, according to parents' opinion (Uryga & Wiatr, 2019; Wiatr, 2018). I shall call these new educational environments – *quasi*-schools. *Quasi* – because these settings operate without school status and, therefore, they are not subject to pedagogical supervision of any educational authorities. This yields greater latitude in organizing the setting. They are not obliged to hire certified teachers, provide grades, and adhere to any sophisticated organizational and hygienic outlines.

In 2013 four *quasi*-schools in two heavily populated Polish cities took off. Currently, dozens of such establishments operate in Poland and more are about to start. Their supporters draw from progressivism and modern psychological and neurological concepts of "brain learning" (Żylińska, 2011). Rarely do the *quasi*-schools' architects relate to democracy concepts or the broader social order.

Quasi-schools operate based on the legal footing passed for homeschooling which is under certain circumstances legal in Poland. Parents, however, do not educate their children at home, but they organize smaller or bigger permanent "learning groups". Their concept is close to

Meighan's flexi schooling (Meighan, 1991) where children can learn in different configurations and locations according to various schedules. In order to stay in homeschooling mode, children have to pass the yearly exams. How, when and where children learn for these exams is, however, not fully structured and hinge on the child. Failing the exams, however, entangles certain consequences for parents and subsequently for children. Parents lose the right to "homeschool" their child, and the children have to return to regular school.

This kind of setting is not prohibited under Polish educational law. It is, however, also not explicitly outlined in it. Many would say, that determined parents devised a way within the educational law, to implement independence and participation.

Research project

The noticeable contemporary involvement of certain groups of parents in building educational environments has become a starting point for my considerations.

This article draws upon a fragment of exploratory research conducted from 2014 which aimed to explore the essence and basis of exceptional parental involvement in child education in reference to parental learning (Wiatr, 2013, 2015, 2018, 2019a). The research questions concerned the parents' actions themselves such as their repertoire, forms and scope; the meanings given to these actions by parents; as well as wider ideologies in which parental activities find their justification. The qualitative study was based on constructivism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and post-structuralism (Foucault, 1975). This main theoretical framework was complemented by other selected theories and concepts. In this elaboration, the reflexive modernization approaches conceptualized by Beck and Giddens were referred to (Beck et al., 1994).

The study employed the case study method with applied strategies of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) and discourse analysis embedded in the sociology of knowledge (Keller, 2012). In-depth interviews (1-2,5 hours) were conducted with eleven mothers and fathers of preschool and schoolchildren involved in *quasi*-schools. The parents were representatives of the "new middle class" (Bernstein, 1977). They all grew up in socialist Poland and they are all

denizens of heavily populated cities. A few parents were leaders of the first *quasi*-schools others had their children attending these establishments. Some were interested in emerging *quasi*-schools. All interviews were transcribed and analyzed from bottom-up.

During the analyses, the *engagement* category arose. Its multidimensionality and diversity activated different paths of interpretation for "what was going on" within the described phenomenon. The parents' determination, readiness to assume risk and responsibility for a child's education seemed to fit in with the ideals of strength, resistance, participation and empowerment/ emancipation. After closer examination, the parents' actions appeared to reveal something more which calls upon a more detailed examination. Therefore, in what follows I shall present the emergence of the *engagement* category. I shall theoretically elaborate on it using the concept of reflexive modernization (Beck et al., 1994). I shall discuss the floating meanings of parents' engagement in a child education from different perspectives such as empowerment, engagement, participation on the one hand, and psychologization and disempowerment of the social realm on the other.

Between risk, madness and responsibility

The decision to withdraw a child from the educational system by parents is not an easy task. It is described by parents in terms of challenge, risk, uncertainty and fear but simultaneously as a duty, necessity or responsibility. This is how parents portray their decision:

And I was afraid of this. (...) That WRENCHING someone from a reality, which is, familiar, "marked with own pee", smells familiar, and recognized. [M05 34-34]

…the anxiety we all feel, is: what if the child does not pass on core curriculum (...). So we're not forcing it to learn ... so, how are we supposed to make it learn? Like, say Physics. If it doesn't want to learn Physics? [F03 8-8]

At the same time, parents feel that knowledge itself about the feasibility of other-than-mainstream education makes organizing it unavoidable:

And suddenly it turned out that this is not a freak of nature, and (...) nobody knows what it is

doing, but it turned out that there are a lot of such places. (...) So the credibility for me increased, that …this can be done. If it can be done, well, my children certainly will not stay put for 45 minutes. [F09 15-16]

Parents report unwanted transformations the child undergo after having started attending systemic school. They refer to them as circumstances of their decision: *…Marta stopped showing any desire to do something else in her life. This search for her interests and passions. (…) The school is focused on results, on the tests, and, and this is something that disturbed me a lot.* [M04].

"... in the second grade, we already saw that there was a lot of apathy and sadness in a child who had been joyful and curious about the world. And who wanted to shut down, relax after school wanted to come back, preferably turn on a fairy tale, cut off from the world and just let the steam out" [M05 2-2]

The risk of harm mentioned above, however, does result exclusively from the situation of leaving the child in the given educational system. It turns out that taking the child from the regular school entangles different types of risk and uncertainty. While the first perspective is connected with the risk of loss of a child's innate "virtues". The second one entitles some other problems. Some parents are afraid that this kind of solution might not last long. They worry that due to the child's potential failure at the yearly exam, the child would have to return to the regular school. Some of them are worried that the new setting will collapse due to the other parents' withdraw. The quasi-schools are fully dependent on another parents' support. Finally, some parents are afraid that their children will not take part in essential for future life generational experience: *in the beginning, this rebel is really that, that you take out your children from a mainstream, and I do not know whether it would not hurt them, right? Will it not turn against them later on, right? Because at the end of the day you have to live in the system too, really. Well, not in the educational system but in a system that is a derivative of this system, right? And THIS was the biggest anxiety for me. The more that I had no outside support (…) except for the parents - the lunatics, who went about it, right?* [M07 30-30]

Parents strive to balance their unobvious choices and the risk they carry out. The uncertainty of the choice is heard in two

conflicting voices that represent two strong discourses. One is rooted in the belief in proven systemic education as leading to anticipated vocational success. The discourse builds on notions, such as, high-stake tests, academical achievements, effort and competitiveness:

Maia's leading teacher (…) was a person who competed with the 7-year-olds. Anyway, she used to say very often, (…) "Ladies and gentlemen, (…) we started the same textbook as seven-year-olds have," and then in (...) second grade - for example: "Ladies and gentlemen, we are already in the fourth part of the textbook for the second grade, while the 7-year-olds - imagine that! - they have just reached the third part". [M05].

The second voice comes from the anxiety concerning the child's balanced and full development. It is saturated with such notions such as, emotional security, authenticity, creativity, inner-integrity, self-directives, autonomy, relationality, respect and responsibility:

…this first grade was painful for her because she was brought up and used to the fact that she really made choices alone (...) and did not have to adapt to the whole group. Which means, she could do it when she wanted to and when she chose this group. And when she was in a class, which she had to sit upright, she had to keep her hands on the bench, she had to ... do a lot of things she didn't understand: "why?". And asking questions that were cut, because they generally interfered the lesson. [M05 2-2]

Two voices are combined and intertwined together in multiple ways. Sometimes they appear as a discussion parents have with other parents or other people. One father says: *"I was sitting at the parents' council meeting, where it was presented in percentages and tables, which class, when, in what state, why, how much moved up, and what the headmaster would do in reference to it. So now, I am really broken that I didn't get up and didn't say that I wasn't interested and that I'd have talked about something else. But I was the only parent who didn't want to talk about it. After that, I talked to them about it and in general: "No, this is very important, school ranking, our children, high school diploma, something". People.* [F09 65-65]

Parents know from experience that doing things differently is perceived by others as taking away a chance for awaited child's success and happiness in the future. They report about other parents affirming and engaging in school achievement discourse: *all children (...) began to apply for various contests (...). I know from conversations with parents that these are the ambitions of the parents, not the children. They are. (…) Because even a child who is really fascinated with, insects, is (…) fascinated by insects and not by nature as such. (…) So, this contest's thing is a pressure from parents. And among those children who I see, I do not see someone who would be fascinated by, e.g. a spelling competition. But parents know that there are additional points, that you can win something, so they push their children.* [M04 9-9]

Parents also hear other people, such as friends or relatives questioning their decision: *"I work in an industry that should be quite liberated and have imagination and so on, and the people younger than me, I don't know, even 15 years younger, said: "What do you do? Why are you taking children from school? After all, the school doesn't bite. Each of us survived the school".* [M07 30-30]

Parents are aware that for many, it is foolish to abandon the proven solution even if it is not perfect. They hear that it is insanity, irresponsibility or fantasy. A father reports his discussion with his own father: *…we had a really huge fight when it came to what I wanted to do with my child, what an evil-... (...) I have such an email, such, such a compendium of unschooling, so "look at yourself, read, watch the videos". He got one sentence out of it and with one sentence he responded (...) that this is not for everyone and so on, and it ended there. So, you know, it really evoked specific emotions..., a new kind of internal family conflict.* [F03 200-200]

Sometimes the competing discourse is expressed with one's own voice: *it was difficult for me because I felt very strongly that I was right, but I couldn't find it, you know, somewhere like this confirmation in normal people, right? In those more like me than those completely there, those who have already left this system.* [M07 30-30]. Those who are on the other side are no longer considered "normal people" even by the parents who want to join them.

Stepping out of the proven solution, the parents require precise justifications to legitimize controversial choices. In the search for these justifications, they re-construct themselves using psychological, therapeutic, neurological

discourses: *… I carry around in me this [unconditional] approval, to-, I don't know, my son-. If he wishes to become a shoeshine boy, as long as he is a happy as a shoeshine boy, I have no right to interfere and force him to study, say, to be a lawyer, doctor, or whatever, [laughs] so I have found this readiness in me.* [M07 21-22]

In fighting fears and uncertainty, parents are assisted by psychological and neurological books and parental guides. The parents also turn to experts, who are ready to take care about the process of parents' psychological transformation. These activities inscribe in the intensive parenting discourse (Hays, 1996), which is entangled with therapeutization and psychologization (e.g. De Vos, 2016). A mother whose child is in quasi-school, explains her psychological work as a process that she undergoes together with other parents in this quasi-school: *due to the fact that we went through the group process, and we also had a lot of psychological support for the whole time, and I think we are on a similar level, and on the same path - it seems to me - that we all are, despite all kinds of fears and doubts.* [M05 34-34]

Strengthened by experts and available readings, the parents become equipped to present their coherent justifications, in reference exclusively to the discourse of the child's emotional safety, authenticity, responsibility, innate curiosity and autonomy. By doing so, they construct themselves as exceptional parents and create their "local rationality". It makes their decisions and behaviors consistent, meaningful and legitimized. A father's account of a discussion he and his partner had is a good illustration of the ongoing negotiations, within which two discourses compete and "local rationalities" emerge:

"She does not believe in this solution, that random people who aren't competent, who aren't educators, don't have pedagogical education, and, there is one psychologist, (…) [they] will mentor and will deal with the education of our child, that it can't work that way (…). The belief that the child is able to start to be interested and learn by itself, was also impossible for her to pass. She didn't understand that the child will have a natural desire and interest to explore the world. (...) …she remembered from the past that even after high school she didn't know what she wanted to do in life. "Then how such a small person would have known?" (...) It turned out that we confuse the basic concepts, such as,

initial acceptance, (...) such optimism and that we would raise a child differently and that we would enable him in a natural way (...) to explore the world, through experimentation, making mistakes, social integration, (...) problem solving (...) And because it is also cool that these kids like themselves, decide and set their own rights, regulations that they follow and that they solve conflicts there. It was cool, but, in a fact, these are one principle, and your internal beliefs, stereotypes, the pattern in which you were growing up, this is the second. This is probably the biggest barrier for all who have these, taking the children away. Because we are stripped of such flexibility of the idea that a really different system from the one we went through is possible to implement. And that it is effective or is just as good, if not better because the child gains additional strengths in the form that I didn't know, openness, way of seeking knowledge, and not only cramming and passing exams. [F03 2-2]. The father sets the ground for the new education, and accuses other parents and partially himself for being tied by old structures. He is eager to liberate himself; to emancipate from the old structures. What his partner considers important, such as, well-educated teachers and qualified pedagogues, is not important to him. While his partner believes that each child needs structure and strong leadership, he claims that children benefit from the lack of structure. In liberated learning, where emotions and cognitions come into play, the psychologist seems to be the right choice. His partner is afraid of the child's failure in terms of education. He values the child's freedom, autonomy, and self-confidence. These concepts are handy for him to emancipate from the coercion of the old structures and language employed. He questions the mother's attitude as restricted by stereotypes, and fear-driven.

Parents set up new local rationality as well as new rational, reflexive, well-informed and responsible subject. They argue that what others concern insane, is, in fact, rational and derives from parents' profound sense of responsibility, broad comprehension, and scientific knowledge. They challenge - in their opinion - outdated dogmas and structures. They revise assumptions about the child's development, its developmental needs and about being parents. It is illustrated by a mother's utterance: *"when Olga was small, (…) I started to develop myself. I did some*

interpersonal trainings there. I did it to be a good mother". [M02 67-67]

Some parents feel that they need to transform into good parents. Later on the same mother's relates: *"I went through a personal transformation, (...) because I changed, my husband changed, my surroundings changed, and so our environment changed a lot, through motherhood"* [M02 69-69].

Parents, however, do not see it yet, that constructing a "better" parent as well as changing the "local rationality" and language justifying it, they become captured and restricted by the other discourse, and new structures – psychological ones (Wiatr, 2018). They shape their vision of a child and its development in reference to psychological knowledge. The child seems to be a susceptible and fragile creature, vulnerable and helpless vis-à-vis the austere mainstream school. Parents' vision of the school is evaluated as harmful for the child and unfriendly to parents' participation. They do not believe in the success of the inside transformation of the given educational system. One mother describes it as *a fight with windmills*. [M02 81-81]

Parents' motivation derives from their concern for their child's well-being and emotional safety. It is oriented to improve present conditions for its development, as well as to protect the child's future. There is a point when an active subject emerges in the form of an engaged parent who is ready to take the floor, and ready to engage multiple individual resources to protect a child.

At this point, parents' determination seems to include important transformative traits of engagement and participation which potentially might result in transforming social structures and social relations. The "go-getter" parents search for a space to act and participate. Soon they discover that none of these formulas are envisaged in the present school. Instead, they are offered to follow the school-driven and school-managed collaboration models passed down in stiff traditional school structures. Once activated, parents challenge the school system and dare to look for better possibilities.

Reflexive Modernization Era and Reflexive Subjects

Categories such as reflexivity and rationality of the subject, its permanent exposure to uncertain and controversial choices, perpetual struggle for their justifications, acceptance of individual responsibility for own decisions, as well as high skills in mobilizing available resources, have led my theoretical explorations to the theory of reflexive modernization offered by the three authors: Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash (Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 2009). Although their perspectives were not thoroughly convergent, the authors offered three explanations of contemporary social changes. Aware and familiar with critical revisions of this approach (e.g. Alexander & Smith, 1996; Lash, 1994; Wynne, 1996) I claim that it remains a valuable framework for a more profound understanding of the parental activity. Its indisputable value consists of its possible extensions with such concepts as Bourdieu's habitus, Rose's politics of life, Foucault's governmentality, Althusser's interpellation or Furedi's therapeutic culture and psychologization.

The main tenet of Beck's and Gidden's approaches is that reflexive modernization is a process of modernity alternations. The reflexive character of these transformation means that the changes occur not as a result of political planning, based on some diagnosis, but they occur surreptitious and unplanned. They are 'side effects' of modernity (Beck, 1994). Beck claims that the reflexive modernity process consists of methodically questioning the modernity and its faith in the power of science and technology. Challenges of the modern world result from the discovery that the gain from techno-economic progress has its dark side in the form of uncertainty and risk (Beck, 1992). As Beck constates, we now all live in the 'risk society' (Beck, 1992) or as Giddens calls it in the situation of "manufactured uncertainty" (Giddens, 1994).

New "mega risks" have various social consequences, both structural and individual. It causes modernity self-confrontation and questioning traditional structures as well as profoundly influences the social environment of individuals and transposes into the fabrics of personal existence (Giddens, 1991, 2004). The awareness is growing that institutions designed to manage the risks are the ones responsible for its production. It entails the process of undermining traditional structures and institutions (Beck, 1994) and results in the dismantling of conventional norms and patterns (conveyed e.g. nation-state, class, family or

other core institutions) in which individual and collective decisions used to be rooted.

Owing to the liberation from conventional norms and ties, the individual becomes free to make their own decision and to construct their own life as one pleases or how one is able to make their choices. From now on, individuals are to choose and decide about "education, profession, job, place of residence, spouse, number of children" (Beck, 1992, p. 135). Doing so they assume the role of makers of their own meaningful biography, beyond the conventional patterns and they become a reflexive do-it-yourself project (Beck, 1992, 1994).

Towards Subpolitical Engagement and Beyond

The newly gained freedom is an ambiguous nature as it sets individual insecurity. Free choices are unavoidably risky and unpredictable. Do-it-yourself-biography becomes a risky project and the individual life becomes life at one's own risk. Consequently, people are forced to live paradoxes. The conditions of a risk society exert pressure on individuals to make choices and to take the individual responsibility for potential individual failure.

The liberated individual is not entirely released. As the old structures dismantle, the new coercive structures emerge (Beck, 1994). The 'free' individual becomes entangled in a new network of norms and patterns of behavior which are mediated by the labor market, the educational system, the professional regime, the mass communication, the overwhelming consumer markets, experts' discourses, and etc.

Emerging structures offer diverse systems of knowledge, which are often incoherent or even contradicting. It means knowledge is exposed to questions. Its truth claims are limited to a certain context (Beck, 1994). The experience of conflict about what and how and under what circumstances people know results in the emergence of multiple local rationalities where individual decisions and choices find their justification. The human existence in such conditions requires developed reflexivity from the acting subject – the aptitude to calculate, collect and analyze data, and to stay informed (Beck, 1994).

Multiple rationalities open ground for political struggles which, due to the collapse of the traditional institutions, are debated far from roundtables and administrative levels. According to Beck, these multiple rationalities with their truth claims and priorities, spawn the field of subpolitics (Beck, 1994). Subpolitics, denotes the reflexive modern way of articulating and realizing priorities of groups, their interests, and needs at stake, beyond the world of formal politics. According to Beck, a gap after political involvement of the first modernity is filled in by microlevel and subpolitical society governed from below. Subolitics are the spaces in which agents, reflexive individuals negotiate their local rationalities, and doing so engage in the redesign of the social (Beck, 1994). The subpolitical activity resembles the individual co-operationalism but is however regarded by Beck as a "boon" and an opportunity for democratic processes (Beck, 1994).

The way parents engaged in *quasi*-schools create their own rationality and justification of their doings seems to inscribe in the subpolitical process typical for reflexive modernity. They find common spaces for co-operational, subpolitical engagement in order to fulfill their own vision of education and support for children's development.

The lineage and dynamics of the quasi-school phenomenon could be shortly portrayed on a continuum. The starting point is the introduction of superficial parental participation in school. It manifests in the school-driven parental involvement as well as in the encapsulating of parents' councils. The next stage emerges when under the pressure of the parental ideologies, some parents, heavily focus on the protection of their child's fragile psyche and transforming their parental role. The final point is the shift toward the parents-driven engagement. It happens however beyond conventional structures and proven solutions of the traditional school system. Parents find a way to put their perspective and intentions "in motion". They are able to afford it because of the multiple resources available. On the one hand, parents dislocate from the system in which their roles are static or superficial and their needs for high-quality parenting are disregarded. On the other hand, creating new, better educational environments, parents dismantle traditional institutions. They act in a subpolitical way.

Parents organize the new educational environments freely, independently, from scratch and according to their own ideas. The new

educational settings are composed of different available "blocks" like labs, lectures, workshops, crafts, and parents' other resources focused around the child's developmental needs. Being so, *quasi*-schools inscribe in the mode of other "do-it-yourself" projects. Next to the "do-it-yourself" biography (Beck, 1992) or "do-it-yourself" family (Beck-Gernsheim, 1998), the "do-it-yourself" school is born. The parental initiative proceeds along the continuum from being offered school driven involvement with encapsulating experiences to parents' driven engagement.

The main tenet here is that the child's wellbeing and happiness are the main triggers of parental role and commitment. This great potential, however, "runs out" in an individual power that is untranslatable to social empowerment. Subpolitical co-operationalism, in this case, loses the sight of community needs, neighborhood's common good and the common social vision. In subpolitical engagement, parents are the individuals interested precisely in the education and development of their own children. Their drive is not embedded in their neighborhood but in mostly psychological developmental needs.

Conclusion

Feeling both obliged to act in a responsible and reflexive way for the sake of vulnerable children and constrained by the existing school regulations and practices, the parents decide to disassociate themselves from the unreactive structure and assemble their own do-it-yourself school.

By releasing themselves from the constraints of the school system, parents do stop engaging in the improvement or modification of the old structures. Hence, those stay untouched. Abandoning systemic school, parents take over the control and the responsibility for their own children's education and bring about the individualization and privatization of the incumbent public sphere.

Their energy and resources are directed to their kids only, with no broader reflection on the social realm and public engagement. Parents' perspective dwells in individual liberalism and their choices are a manifestation of their prior empowerment. The logic of reflexive modernization makes the parents feel not only ready but eligible and empowered to take responsibility for their children's happiness and well-being formulated in a therapeutic and psychologic terms.

The fact that some parents are well-equipped to individually benefit from the reflexive modernization poses a question about the winners and losers of the contemporary processes typical to reflexive modernization. The do-it-yourself *modus operandi* seems to be more adjusted to selected groups of contemporary society. In this case, the reflexive modernization logic empowers the empowered parents in their do-it-yourself life. It, however, simultaneously disempowers the unprivileged, who, due to socio-economical structure, do not have the required resources to live at one's own risk. It might result in individualizing social problems.

In the process, the transformative concepts such as engagement, empowerment, participation in reflexive modernization mode remodel themselves and start serving the framework of the strong neoliberal discourses.

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