

Parental public pedagogy: A Polish leader about being together, where action is possible and freedom can emerge

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Abstract

The study of the current parental grass-roots movement, the initial report of which I present in this paper, focuses on the leader of this movement in Poland. The interview with her is the basis of the case study through which I argue that parents create a public pedagogy. By focusing on the common good, this pedagogy puts them against the ongoing practices of denying human and civil rights in Poland, and towards a democratic formula of social coexistence both at school and beyond it, in a public sphere that has currently appropriated by the radical right-wing discourse. The conclusions grounded in the Gert Biesta's concept of public pedagogy, and parents are construed as force capable of transforming the dominant "pedagogy for the public" (when people ought to be taught how to be in public space) into a "public pedagogy in the interest of publicness". The latter manifests itself as concern for the common good.

Keywords: parental movement, parental leader, Poland, public pedagogy, common good, democracy

Introduction

In this paper I present the preliminary results of a study focused on a contemporary parental grass-roots movement that aims to shape (and restore) a democratic school space, based on respect for human and civil rights. The study also addresses the wider issue of the nature of the public realm in Poland. The main emphasis is on how Polish parents are reconfiguring the public realm in a time of considerable

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political upheaval. I shall focus specifically on the actions of the movement's leader as part of a case study of a parents' movement in the current challenging political climate. Ever since 2015, when the socially-conservative right-wing Law and Justice party gained power, a discourse has developed in which the rights of minorities are undermined (Mendel 2019; 2020a,b; 2022). Schools are directed to be insensitive to the needs of transgender students, and to ignore their parents' requests for differentiated treatment. "LGBT-free zones" have been established in various municipalities and regions, and there is widespread lack of respect for non-heteronormative persons. National and ethnic minorities are no longer able to access educational provision in their languages. Parents have been vociferous in their condemnation of such measures and have proclaimed the urgent need to regain the equality principles of social coexistence manifested in school life (Uryga 2018). As the case study presented below shows, parents are both a political force (a noticeable player in political games at various levels, including parliamentary ones), and an educational force, influencing public space and democratizing social life. The study, the initial findings of which I would like to present in this paper, focuses on Dorota Loboda, the leader of the parenting movement in Poland. The interview conducted with her is the basis on which I develop the case study. As part of this study, I analyze documents and other material illustrating the activity of parents, e.g. the minutes from sessions of the Polish parliament; popular newspaper articles, Internet articles and notes. These are forms of resistance to the ongoing practices of denying human and civil rights in Poland. They present a radical alternative to the dominant right-wing, nationalist, and religion-based discourse by positing a democratic vision of social coexistence, both at school and beyond it, in the public sphere.

In this paper, I argue that parents create a kind of public pedagogy, which – by focusing on the common good produced “bottom-up” in the practices of everyday life, e.g. school life – puts them in opposition to the populist politics of the rulers.

In sum, parents emerge as a significant political and pedagogical force. This confirms Biesta's (2019) assumption about the political nature of public pedagogy which is capable of transforming the dominant “pedagogy for the public” (adequate for people whom we think ought to be taught how to be/exist in the public sphere) into a “public pedagogy in the interest of publicness”. The latter manifests itself as concern for the common good and as an insistent striving to achieve such a condition in the public space – a form of being together in which everyone can act and freedom can emerge (Biesta 2012, p. 692-693).

Theoretical background: Public pedagogy

Thinking about a public pedagogy fits into the perspective of Gert J.J. Biesta. Therefore, the starting point of this paper is his public pedagogy based upon the premise that pedagogy – centring on the subject and education – focuses on events that take place in the public sphere, between people. Such pedagogy brings up questions about the relationships that create it – relationships that “take place” (Biesta 2017, p.14-15)².

Biesta believes that we do not simply exist in the world (I before the world), but also constantly move towards it (I being called into the world), and that it is “there” – in the public sphere – that we establish and maintain relationships with others (2017). These relationships co-create the public sphere. In thinking about the public sphere, the author draws from the philosophy of Jacques Rancière, mainly on his idea of spatial equality and social justice. This finds its expression in the category of the *sensible* and in the concept of “the distribution of the sensible” (Rancière 2005). The ambiguity of the term, *sensible*, meaning both something that is perceived sensually and carries meaning (is acceptable), allows us to understand the essence of the category that Rancière introduced under this name. The essence of the public sphere is that it is premised upon equality in social relations, i.e., not when everyone receives an “equal” share/part of it, but when all of us, as users, feel that we co-create a just space and accept it as such, sharing it with each other. According to Biesta, it is inherent in the very definition of the public sphere that it continually engages with the question of equality. Thinking about the public sphere in relation to pedagogy, Biesta focuses on the conditions of the possibility for subjective agency and freedom. The sense of freedom determines the freedom of action, regardless of the subject’s entanglement in the discursive reality filled with numerous forms of regulation and the endless exercise of power (Biesta 2012). In this context, Biesta examines various types of interference into the relations that create the public sphere (Biesta 2017; 2012).

Interruption and the pedagogy of interruption

The result of the kind of analyses rooted in Biesta’s thought is, on the one hand, the confirmation of assumptions – following on from Rancière – regarding the effectiveness of interruption, breaks (in Rancière also *fissures*, *ruptures*) that interfere with the

2 Biesta develops the concept of “public sphere pedagogy” which expresses his interest in public space. He does so in many of his publications, such as the key monograph in which, in order to strengthen his argumentation about the strength and specificity of the relationships between education and politics, school and society, he presents, among other, over a dozen of his previously written texts relating his thoughts about public space: (Biesta 2019).

existing public realm, i.e. the current – and perceived as unacceptable – shape of the relationships that make up the public sphere. Assuming that becoming part of the public sphere, and thus co-creating it, relates to the quality of interpersonal bonds, Biesta points to the constant possibility of an educational interruption. For example, an interruption through actions resembling the staging of one's own disagreement, acting out that which is unacceptable within the shared space. Such an interruption means, as I have already mentioned, “to introduce an incommensurable element— an event, an experience and an object—that can act both as a test and as a reminder of publicness” (Biesta 2012, p. 697).

The outcomes of Biesta's analyses lead – on the other hand – to the conclusion that the public sphere is best described by intersecting approaches from the field of politics that are related to aesthetics and pedagogy, and not – as Rancière would have it – by political and aesthetic categories. Hence, Biesta considers the public sphere to be constituted in politically and educationally formed relationships that are sensitive to aesthetic relations, as the sphere of public pedagogy. He defines this pedagogy as an expression of the relationship (or an intersection of influences) between education and politics. At the same time, he emphasizes the obvious fact that pedagogical approaches are present not only in formal education systems, but also beyond them, taking over its functions and assuming its various forms (Biesta 2014). Within this framework, Biesta describes three types of public pedagogy – pedagogy for the public, pedagogy of the public and pedagogy that enacts a concern for 'publicness', respectively.

Public pedagogies

In the public sphere – not only in Poland - we are constantly dealing with the political work of education that consists in moulding subjects to a particular shape (cf. Biesta 2012; 2013; 2014; 2017; 2019). Such education is based on a single, politically correct narrative coming from the top. One such example is the dictates emerging from the current government in Poland and the ruling party headed by Jarosław Kaczyński which is intent on teaching Poles “how to get up from their knees” (Mendel & Szkudlarek 2021). In this respect, the government practices a kind of pedagogy of negativity; one about which the only consensus is about what it should not be. For example: “pedagogy of shame”, “micromania” or “dark pedagogy”. Biesta called this kind of public pedagogy a “dedicated pedagogy”, one that is adequate for people whom we think ought to be taught how to be/exist in the public sphere – a “pedagogy for the public” (Biesta 2012, pp. 683-697).

Meanwhile, “pedagogy of the public”, is the pedagogy of people who constitute the public sphere, but contrary to the proclaimed intentions of those who are objec-

tified, who – out of concern for their freedom – are offered instruction on how to achieve freedom (for example, as in Paulo Freire’s pedagogy) (Biesta 2012). Coming back to the public sphere in contemporary Poland, the pedagogical activity of the opposition can, in a way, fit in with this version of public pedagogy (Mendel 2021). It is a pedagogy that operates with a narrative that shows no interest in the subject and his/her unique identity formation and particular position within the relations that make up the public space. This narrative, intended to counter the narrative of the ruling camp, is usually aimed at reversing the *status quo* and mobilizing the electorate for reasons of expediency and self-interest. As a result, this pedagogy is based upon unoriginal gestures of resistance that disregard the subjective agency of those recruited into political resistance.

The third kind of public pedagogy manifests as concern for the common good, i.e. coexistence in the public sphere. It can be defined as a “public pedagogy as concern for publicness”, or a “public pedagogy in the interest of publicness”. Biesta describes this pedagogy as being together in the public space where “action is possible and freedom can appear” (Biesta 2012, p.693). Following Hannah Arendt, the author repeats this statement multiple times, considering it as a kind of signpost for this optimal – as he sees it – version of public pedagogy (Biesta 2012).

According to this Biesta, becoming a part of the public sphere and thus co-creating it is an opportunity for the development of interpersonal bonds. This form of public pedagogy is based on the conditions for the possibility of action and freedom, with the possibility of an educational interruption playing a key role. Interruption understood as an intentional act, one that is undertaken out of concern for the quality of the common sphere. It is the introduction of this “incommensurable element” that provides a vital channel for the expression of dissent. This is tantamount to an aesthetic expression of the fact that the existing composition – the acceptable order – of the common space has broken down, and an ethical expression that the public sphere requires the presence of new forms of representations and different configurations of subjectivity. What is at stake is an interruption aimed at – let us repeat – a kind of being together in which action is possible and freedom can appear. Remaining in this thought, let us now turn consider how a parental movement – occupying a third space next to education and politics, becomes intertwined in public pedagogy.

Methodological points

The research on which this article is based is a case study using narrative interviewing techniques and document analysis. In keeping with the qualitative perspective of this study, I focused on achieving a description that is well grounded in the

data. My main goal is to provide an insight into the parents' movement based on a case study of the experiences of its leader, as well as an account on other parents' educational and political activities in the public space. This description, using categories taken from theories that apply to this context, will provide valuable insights into the nature of public pedagogy and the pursuit of the common good and democratic equality in a common space.

Research questions revolve around the current circumstances of parents, their ways of being together in the face of emerging challenges, and the quality of their participation in the public sphere in contemporary Poland. The main questions are as follows: what forms of association characterize parental activity in the public sphere? How do parents express their togetherness in the current socio-political context?

The various ways in which parents participate in political dialogues in public space will be explored. We shall also examine why parental association is a relevant tool for democracy.

The case study method referred to above is a situational and relational method (Mitchell 1983). It has certain similarities with the approaches adopted in postcolonial anthropology (Sykes et al. 2001). According to this trend, people inhabit a conflicted but shared social system, and that conflicted social system is the proper subject of anthropological analysis. In my approach to the case study, I agree with Karen Sykes, who places her research in postcolonial anthropology, that "each case is taken as evidence of the stages in the unfolding process of social relations between specific persons and groups" (Sykes 2022).

The method of analyzing the research material used in this study - in the perspective of situational and relational, postcolonial anthropology (Sykes et al 2001; Sykes 2022) - was grounded in the approach described by Clifford Geertz as the thick description method (2017; Gibb 2007). I analyzed the text of the interview, considering the information obtained from this supplementary material, as well as considering the contextual data, such as the legal situation that determines specific actions of parents, the social atmosphere and political turmoil in the country related to parental activity on the national arena. Description, thickened by the progressive introduction of contextual elements - in reference to the concept of Clifford Geertz's interpretative research practice - was the main category and form of my analyzes (2017). Such a description aims to preserve all the richness of the data and to emphasize the connections between what is happening and human intentions and strategies for action. The "thick" description will thus become the starting point for further analysis, which will make it possible to clarify what we are dealing with (Gibb

2007, pp.1-10). In this case, “further analysis” means the final, reflective conclusions (meta-reflection) and theoretical conceptualization of parental movement.

As part of the method I chose, I made the activity of Dorota Loboda, the mother of two daughters and a well-known leader of the “Parents Against Education Reform” movement, the main focus of this article. This movement brings together over a million participants, active in various parts of the country and protesting in various forms against the reformist actions of the current government, including withdrawing the decisions of previous governments on the three-cycle education system as part of compulsory schooling (instead of the 6-year primary school, 3-year lower secondary school and 3-year high school, return to the 8-year primary school and 4-year high school), or starting school education from aged 6. Dorota Loboda is also president of the “Parents Have a Voice” foundation. She is active in the feminist movement, being a member of the Program Council of the nationwide organization “Congress of Women”. Recently, for a second term of office, she was elected a councillor in Warsaw (cf. Dorota Loboda https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dorota_%C5%81oboda (10-06-2022).

I conducted the interview with Dorota Loboda - due to the pandemic restrictions - by phone in May 2020, having obtained her consent to publish its content together with the name of the interviewee. The transcript of the interview, containing 4,277 words, was the main research material in this case study. Other, supplementary material analyzed are documents such as parliamentary materials regarding solutions proposed by parents (4), the minutes from Polish parliament’s sessions (2), press and Internet articles on the activities of parents in relation to the condition of Polish education and society (Duduszko-Zyglewska 2018; Nowak 2021 and many other press and internet texts).

The research analysis process can be summarized briefly as follows: as part of thickening my research description, I thematically analyzed and contextualized the interview with Dorota Loboda, as well as other materials mentioned above regarding parental participation in public space in recent years in Poland.

Findings

Beginnings: Education, politics, and a fragile community

Dorota Loboda has never been a teacher, nor has she in any way been formally associated with an institutional education since she completed her studies at the University of Warsaw. However, as she noted several times in the interview, everything she does in public space is “bound by a common framework for educational activities”.

She claims she realized this at a time when her daughters were attending elementary school. Then she became involved in the advice of the parents and - as she said - "it all began with this".

I felt that the influence of parents was insufficient, and we as parents can offer the school a lot and make it a more child-friendly place. **And this is where it all started.** I was active in the parents' council, which then turned into a rebellion against the reform of education introduced by minister Anna Zalewska on behalf of the Law and Justice Party. I had a feeling that our **fragile community**, which had somehow been worked out in my daughters' school, would simply collapse under the pressure of what the authorities had funded us, and I was deeply convinced that these schools would change for the worse after the reform and, unfortunately, they changed. I was not wrong. So I, together with other mothers, started to protest against Zalewska's reform plans, and I started cooperation with the trade union of the Polish Teachers Association (ZNP).

Parents in this movement have therefore consolidated themselves against decisions taken at the political level, which organize the life of schools and change society in a controversial direction. Resistance became the primary basis of this movement. One could say Loboda and other parents interrupted the existing public sphere. Or, closer to Rancièrean meaning, there were fissures, ruptures, that interfered with this space. What did this interruption look like? Dorota Loboda answers this question in the following fragment of the interview:

And this social activity of mine also entered some wider waters then, I started to organize **demonstrations**. And then it somehow so naturally turned out that I would be running for the local government election somewhere, because this role of an educational activist and social activist actually led me to the wall, because it ends somewhere, right? The authorities did not really want to talk to social organizations. However, I imagined that **as a councillor I would have at least some influence on this educational reality, even in one city**. And it really happened. And the fact that this **'Parents Against Education Reform'** movement, it simply turned into a foundation, i.e., **those who were actively protesting against the reform there, when it had already been implemented, did not want to give up either out of this commitment**, and together with other mothers, we established the **'Parents Have a Voice' Foundation**.

The narrator also explicitly shows the extrapolation, the expansion of traffic, resulting from the need for the effectiveness of the actions taken. There is a kind of looking in the public domain for "like", which can be explained in the language of

Ernesto Laclau's theory as the formation of chains of equivalence, generating a politically significant commonality (2005). In practice, it was an active search for allies, and then cooperation with them within the framework of similar postulates, emphasizing democratic values:

And I also joined the activities of other organizations, which may not be directly involved in education itself, but somewhere there, too, was one of the fields of activity, i.e. the Congress of Women and the Women's Strike. Well, because these women's organizations also see the need for changes in education. Because what we do for women's rights and how much is still to be done is also somehow connected with education, because we feel that in this education, not everything is as equal as we would like.

The narrator emphasized education and the educational aspects of her own activities and the activities of "our community" several times. Loboda used the term "fragile" to refer to the community. On the one hand, it seems that the political and legal changes introduced by the ruling party since 2015 and the radical reorganization of the education system and the ensuing curriculum reform had only served to increase this sense of fragility has increased. On the other hand, it was this fragility that probably stimulated activity and - as Loboda put it - the fact that the parents "did not want to give up their commitment".

The interview shows that it was an educational and political commitment at the same time; that the "fragile community" works, presenting itself from the outset (from the activities of class councils, etc.) as two sides of the coin that makes education and politics inseparable. Speaking of school, Dorota Loboda showed the inseparability of education and politics. She explained this as follows:

School is a place where parents start to work a little bit outside of this home sphere and get out of this privacy, this parentage, this home. (...) And then they leave the seclusion of their homes. They also start to act not only for their children, although of course concern for their children's welfare often provides the initial impulse for change. This stems from the feeling that school is not entirely good for their own child or children. However, ***when they start to get involved in such a broader activity, they inevitably change this school for other children as well***. And I see a lot of such active participation from parents who are motivated by a desire to change the school for the better. (...). In sum, ***I saw that larger and wider changes are needed***".

Let the following general reflection be the context for this part of the description (and at the same time the interpretation of the Loboda's statement, above). A school,

and a local school in particular, is a dimension of the public sphere that is most accessible to its citizens. It becomes a kind of laboratory or training ground for democracy and the development of the common good. Parents who send their children to school leave the safe private space of their home with them and enter a new, unknown space, where they come into relation with other people. It is at school, when in caring for their child, they have to go beyond the area of their own interest and co-create everyday life based on equality, that they reach the depth of the meaning of the common good. The interviewee - as if pointing to the moment of birth of the parent-citizen and party activist, and somehow catching him/her transforming from a school activist into a politician in party structures - draws attention to how a parent "goes out into wider waters". Dorota Loboda seems to be giving a lesson about democracy, showing the structural aspects of its practice in relation to parents. She teaches others through the prism of her own experience and notices an important phenomenon:

And I will say that in Warsaw, I am not the only councillor who comes from the parents' councils (...). It is not a single and isolated case that people active in the parents' councils start doing something later. Because such social and activist activity is very addictive, it also burns out, of course, because you do not always achieve your goals and sometimes it is frustrating, but also children finish school and it suddenly turns out that **something is missing and you want to use your energy and then such political activity is a continuation.**

She further argues that political cadres do not come out of nowhere, and their good "breeding ground" is the school with its potential to function as a seeding ground for democratic equality in respect of difference. As she explained:

Working on the parents' council was a great school for me to talk to very different people, because parents, school... is not a monolith. If it is said that parents want something or they do not want something, always remember that **parents are exactly the same as our entire society** (...). The **public school (...)** **reflects the social composition of the broader polity.** In my children's school there were many different options, there were supporters of Law and Justice, deeply religious people and atheists, and somewhere in all of this, **being in the parents' council I had to be able to move and talk to all of them, because we all found ourselves in one place.** We were in the same school, and we had children in the same school. And I also had the feeling that, of course, **each of us would like the best for these children, although we may choose different paths in order to achieve this.**

Rebellion: Politics and Pedagogy of Interruption

The entire interview was strongly focused on the criticism of the current socio-political reality in Poland. Emphasizing the issue of rebellion in it, Dorota Loboda pointed out that

the circumstances we are in, especially in Poland at the moment, make (...) **a large group of parents rebel against what the rulers impose on us and what we see at school**. And this did not start, of course, in the times of Law and Justice. Let me remind you (although she is not the heroine from my fairy tale) that Karolina Elbanowska and her husband, who grew up in such a rebellion, also rejected what the authorities proposed. (...) They also built a movement of people around them who did not agree with what the authorities wanted to impose on them. And so it is that – in my opinion – people are much more active in the fight against something, unfortunately. I regret it because I would like us to be active, to do something positive. On the other hand, the greatest spurt is always when someone wants to impose us, and we rebel.

Loboda conceptualizes rebellion from the perspective of politics and pedagogy of interruption. On the one hand, she talks about the conditions of the impossibility of accepting a public sphere in which the imposition of certain framework and content of education by the authorities is a denial of freedom to citizens. On the other hand, it is about the educational power of rebelling against it, resulting in “building a movement of people who do not agree” and “growing up in rebellion”. The emphasis here is on the distinction between political and party activity:

I would like to make it clear that I understand **politics as various civic actions, not necessarily related to a party** (...). They are like two completely different things, and in this sense, I never talk about the apolitical nature of the school. It should be apart!

For this social activist, what matters is politics as politics, a condition leading to the achievement of the common good rather than a party-political endeavor that represents particular interests and is concerned with maintaining the status quo. This approach could be precisely expressed in Rancière’s language, using his categories of politics and police (2005). In thinking about the political structure of the social world, Dorota Loboda seems to fit directly into the landscape of this philosopher’s thoughts. This can also be confirmed by the way in which they both see the ruthlessness of the interruption. For Rancière (2005), the disruption, the interruption of the existing system of relations is indispensable if it causes fear due to the loss of trust and the paralyzing unpredictability of space. To paraphrase, when I cannot even guess what may be waiting for me, I lose my trust in it, I am afraid to take action.

Loboda makes it more concrete when - focusing on the Polish educational reality - she notices that

in countries where education is more predictable, it is not subject to such rapid and radical changes that are harmful to many people, then it probably also looks different (...) because **there is no need to fight for good quality education, yes. Unfortunately, we still have this need.**

Power of disagreement

Dorota Loboda is renowned for her forensic analysis of the current situation in Poland. Besides being often invited to give television or radio interviews, she participates in public debates on education, democracy, human and civil rights, etc. Her capabilities also manifest themselves rhetorically in the formal position statements she prepares for parliamentary speeches. This was the case in her speech in December 2020, when she petitioned to stop the education reform. However, she was not allowed to speak and thus was not able to present the strong case that she had prepared. As commentators put it, "Loboda was not allowed to speak", because the rulers were afraid of this voice (Dziewiec klamstw Zalewskiej... 2017). Excerpts from her speech were given by someone else. And she planned to say, among other things:

I stand in front of you, representing 910,000 citizens who signed the motion for the school referendum (...). Polish women and Poles signed under the application do not accept the mode and pace of the introduced changes, which can hardly be called a reform. And they loudly say that they feel cheated (Dziewiec klamstw Zalewskiej ... 2017).

During the interview, Dorota Loboda, when asked about the significance of the impact of these hundreds of thousands, or perhaps millions of people behind her, ignored the quantitative aspect and chose to focus on the quality of the people behind her, emphasizing that teachers are the participants of this social movement in which she is a leader:

I feel all the time, first of all, the support of **teachers, who, however, need to speak on their own behalf.** However, I'd like them to know that there are those from outside their immediate professional environment, we parents, who have strong objections to the current direction of travel and who appreciate the work of teachers. But I also have a lot of support from such ordinary people, which surprised me, because there are people I do not know at all and who, for example, write to me on Messenger, or when they see me on the street, they come up to me and talk to me, that they

support what I do and tell that they are close to the vision of a school that I am fighting for together with other people who are active.

Dorota Loboda, with a sense of social support, fights for the fulfilment of the vision of the school and does so in the rhetoric of equality. Not only does she want it for herself, but she also wants to provide it to others:

We are the same citizens regardless of what organization, if any, we belong to. We have the civic right to demand a referendum (Dziewiec kłamstw Zalewskiej ... 2017)

In the interview, she referred to this thread, saying:

I have never joined a party, so **I do not belong to any party**. On the other hand, I am a councillor from the Civic Coalition, so in this respect I am definitely glued to some option somewhere in this public life. However, I do not identify myself 100% with any party.

Loboda not only confirms with this statement her understanding of the nature of politics, but also clearly expresses the strength of her disagreement:

Certainly, of course, **I am in fundamental disagreement** with Law and Justice for many reasons, including educational reasons, but also with everything that Law and Justice does to human rights in general, not only with women's rights, but with human rights and democracy, to which I am very attached.

The feeling of this disagreement cannot do without interruption, which is essential for any fundamental reform of the public sphere. "Fundamental disagreements" about the tenets upon which the public sphere is currently founded in Poland (lack of respect for human rights, equality, democracy) pushes this parent forcefully to subjective, causative action.

Parents' political culture

In a country where several million citizens are parents of students, this group must arouse the pre-election interest of politicians and tempt them to manipulate the opinion of such a powerful lobby. Parents can be a force that promote their interests (cf. Mendel, 2020 a, b). For Dorota Loboda, it is a matter of the political culture of parents, which - in her opinion - reflects the political culture of society. As she explains:

Well, democracy has not been very well received by us, it is quite a young democracy and as a society we are not very civic, and we are quite easily manipulated. In this respect, parents are no different. So, I would not particularly single them out in this respect, rather, **parents are exactly the same as the rest of society**. What I will say is this. It strikes me that if, from the outset, **parents were treated more as partners in the school itself, if you listened to what they say, and they had the impression that their opinion mattered, then maybe they would be more resistant to such manipulation.**

Loboda further analyses this lack of parental resistance to manipulation (“dragging parents to various political sides”) and equates this with the fact that hitherto parents have had neither the opportunity nor the inclination to become more involved in the life of the school. She points to a dawning realization in parents that have the power to effect change. Their confidence is renewed. They believe that they have the power to act, to effect real and lasting change. As she explains:

[S]chool does not always want to treat them as partners. And then suddenly a knight on a white horse appears, that is, a politician who will say, ‘Exactly! Your child is bad at school, we will change everything for you and it will be better’. And it is quite easy to manipulate the person that no one else listened to, so parents think that one or another politician will listen and do what they fail to do. So, I think that **the parents’ political culture would be greater and their civic involvement deeper if they were treated more equally at school.** (...) They would have a greater sense of agency and then they would not expect and believe that someone will come from the outside and change it, because they would have the feeling that it would not be easy to do so and that **the change must be somewhere in all of us, in ourselves.**

Dorota Loboda, participating in social debates, often makes comments on an important element of political culture, namely the quality of our relationships in the public sphere. Loboda’s critical opinions are often addressed to Law and Justice politicians who practice religious fundamentalism and commit homophobic attacks, and other injurious interventions in respect of the LGBT community. For instance, such a case took place after the words of a judge of the Constitutional Tribunal, formerly a member of the Law and Justice party, Krystyna Pawłowicz, who insulted the parents

of a transgender child, his teachers, and the school (Nowak 2021)³. Previously, the Loboda had fought in various ways against the governing parties' practices of binding church and state. For example, she took part in the protest of parents from a school in Wilanow near Warsaw, who opposed the participation of priests in school celebrations. In numerous media statements, she also protested against the "automatism" of inviting priests to the celebrations beginning and ending the school year. For years she had repeated that "religious symbolic violence is the reality of the Polish school" (Duduszko-Zyglewska 2018). Loboda referred to this in an interview as follows:

Law and Justice is constantly invoking family values and says a lot about the fact that parents have the right to decide and should decide. In practice, however, it turns out that this is only the case if these are the parents who fully agree with the line of the Law and Justice party. On the other hand, everyone else who wants to raise children in accordance with their values must fight for these values. If we have a child who in any way deviates from the model that promotes and supports Law and Justice, i.e. it is a child, I don't know, with a different skin color, with a different psychosexual orientation, it is a transgender child, or it is a child who does not believe (...), **we must actually constantly defend the rights of our children.** (...) All those who treat and want to treat - firstly - their children as the persons they are, and secondly want to really have an impact on what values will be passed on to these children and what they absolutely do not want to be passed on to them at school, **must also fight for their own rights.**

As Chantal Mouffe noted in her book on the paradox of democracy, struggle is the *conditio sine qua non* of any political culture and is characteristic of a democratic, conflict-based culture (2009). The natural antagonism of social life generates combat in agonistic forms, when the opposing opponents clash against views, or in military forms, when not opponents, but enemies strive to annihilate each other. In the Polish reality, parents are at loggerheads with the state and its apparatus in the interests of their children. It is a fight for the highest good, in which they are ready for anything (cf. Uryga 2018).

Dorota Loboda stands behind the parents in this fight, explicitly in an agonistic formula, as an opponent striving for the rights of the other side, and not a mortal

3 On Twitter, Krystyna Pawlowicz revealed the name of the school attended by a transgender school-girl and announced that teachers were forced to use her female first name when she believed it was a 10-year-old boy. She attacked the school (headmaster, teachers) and local authorities (the mayor) for their respect for the transgender child and his parents (Nowak 2021).

enemy of the state ruled today by a radical right-wing party. As I have already quoted in another context, Loboda always spoke of her opponents, not her enemies ("And this did not start, of course, in the times of Law and Justice"; "although it is not the heroine from my fairy tale" – about Karolina Elbanowska and her husband, who rebelled against what the authorities before current rulers proposed; etc.). Loboda emphasizes here that parents' actions in public space should generally not be directed against any one party. The fight that the interviewee mentioned earlier concerned the party, but because Law and Justice is the ruling party that attacks human and civil rights. According to Loboda, parents primarily fight to honor and respect these rights. It is also explicitly visible, among others in her vision of perfect social order, an ideal state, and an excellent school:

Let me put it this way, an ideal state is one in which there is a tripartite division of powers that does not exist now; where we really have democracy, where citizens have the right freely to express their views, as long as they do not, of course, infringe upon the freedom of others. Where, of course, **the majority rules, but with respect for the rights of all minorities**. Well, appropriately applying it to the school, it should be a **school where the most important value is the child's well-being and its subjectivity**. Unfortunately, we've been moving away from that a bit recently, although I can't say that it used to be great in this regard. **It's not that this school used to be so democratic, and now, under the rule of Law and Justice, it is not**. We know that change was required before. In this school context, first of all, it is the **school that should provide equal opportunities to all**, regardless of where a given child was born, from what background, with what capital he enters the school; it is the school that should equalize these opportunities and eliminate educational barriers. **The child should indeed be treated subjectively there, be at the center, but the parent should also have the right to participate in this community on an equal footing, so that his opinion is also taken into account**. And the **school would not be ideologized** and that no one would impose party solutions there and would not force ideology into it, as it is happening now. And that **in this school, as well as in the state, it would be possible to express views and that no one would be punished for it**. And that it should **be less oppressive**, because – similarly to our state, which is now very oppressive – school necessarily is, unfortunately it is also like that.

The narrator used a rhetorical strategy here, essential in the agonistic version of being in a conflict together (cf. Mouffe 2009). It suspended time ("it used to be like this") and hierarchies, in the face of the essence of the problem ("democratic school"), equating the statuses of the conflicting parties (it does not matter whether it is Law and Justice or another grouping). As is the case in ritual practices, through these measures she introduced the factor of the sacred into a community bound by

conflict and – through sanctifying the bonds – created the ground for an agonistic relationship based on equality. In the world that Loboda builds with such a pedagogical sensitivity to differences, even opponents with extremely different views can clash agonistically. In short, there is a place for everyone.

Discussion

Parents in Poland can and do interrupt – in accordance to Biesta – based on their belief in the constant possibility of an educational interruption, through actions resembling the staging of their own disagreement, and by introducing “an incommensurable element”, that “can act both as a test and as a reminder of publicness” (Biesta 2012). Parents introduce such elements into the public sphere when – for example, like Loboda in Wilanow – they show the priests one-way tickets and tell them to “get out of school!” or with a million signed signatures under a parliamentary petition shout their loud “no” to the bizarre reform of the education system in Poland. They break the shape of this space by entering it with their being together, which in the current conditions is the fighting form of their “togetherness”.

Without referring to Rancière’s or Biesta’s ideas, Dorota Loboda – as many authors do – cultivates the idea of interruption as an essential element of democratic forms of social life. For example, for David O. Stovall, who described the parents’ movement against school closures, interruption is always an expression of “interruption politics.” This is especially the case when there is a processual disruption of a harmful, socially unjust state (Stovall 2016). In her study of Virginia Woolf Jessica Berman – in a similar, though slightly different way – presented interruption as a narrative model of thought. This model (in this case, the model of feminist thought) is based on a critique of social and economic differentiation (and exclusion) on the basis of gender (Berman 2016, pp. 203-216). The heroine of Berman’s book develops a narrative that interrupts the oppressive reality and simultaneously intervenes in her own, subjective self, constructed by this very interruption. In this sense, interruption means both politics and representations of subjective identity. Both these dimensions lie at the centre of public pedagogy, especially when it comes to the spatially understood, democratic condition of the social co-creation of reality (cf. Mendel 2017).

More or less in this mood, in a constant interest in subjectivity, Dorota Loboda and other parents in Poland seem to develop Biesta’s concept of the pedagogy of interruption (2012; 2013; 2017). One could say that they – assuming that teaching makes sense when it constitutes an act of dissensus (disagreement with the existing state of affairs, inability to act, sense of freedom, inequality, etc.) – bestow interruption with an exceptional status. Interruption is supposed to be a manifestation of dissensus

with regard – like in the thought of Biesta – to the “egological” form of existence focused on the individual self (cf. Biesta, 2017, p.14). As a result, Loboda (et al.) rediscovers and redefines education/pedagogy. She seems to see it as a task that requires and employs the act of interruption (“I’m in a fundamental disagreement ...”, “I fight!”).

In education, the most important thing is to focus on existence/being and resistance. Interestingly, given the aims of this essence, “being-in-resistance” is spatial, because “we are somewhere, not just anywhere” and “existence in and with the world is possible and literally takes place” (Biesta 2017, p.14) – in Polish schools and beyond. This is what we learn about the ways in which parents participate in political dialogues in public space. Loboda and the parents around her are spatially “in-resistance” and thus their participation is a tool for a democracy. They provide us with many examples of interruption, of an essential paradox where individual action is necessary to promote the interests of the collective in a political climate where the language around the interests of the collective has been debased.

In this context, let us turn to the current, “heated” social reality in which parents play a significant role – explicitly – on the street-stage. In Poland their protests have been taking place since October 2020, prompted by an obscene slogan, later repeated on thousands of banners: “Wypierdalac!” (Get the fuck out!). The slogan itself powerfully expresses the meaning in question. The protesting mothers and other women – a collective, but not exclusively female – works in opposition to the existing order, whose “aesthetic harmony”, extends to a tightening of the abortion laws and the removal of other human rights. The protesters want to overthrow such an aesthetic, seeing no harmony in it; an unjust order is not an aesthetically harmonious order. A mismatched, shocking element, rough language was used, and it had ruined – as Rancière would have it – the prevailing aesthetic regime. By means of interruption – via this “incommensurable” element, the slogan – the protesting subject reminds the authorities of its existence (in a democracy, in order to count, one has to “count oneself in”) and – entering into an interactive relationship – test the conditions for the possibility of changes in the space/sphere whose quality has been questioned. As I write these words, the ongoing “staging of dissent” no longer concerns just those opposing the tightening of the abortion laws. Parents of the LGBT+ children and many others are raising their voices, manifesting their existence, and seeking change – all those whose sense of accepting the sphere in which they live has been ruined by the rule of the ruling party (Uryga, 2018).

Conclusions

Dorota Loboda, the leader of a strong parenting movement in Poland, presents a vision of school and society that takes its cue from subjective self-creation, from the constant becoming of a “fragile community” which takes place in the conditions of non-consensual democracy based on an agonist conflict.

As an opponent rather than an enemy, Loboda, speaks from the position of a participant in a world in which there is a place for everyone on an equal footing. As a parent, she is fighting an oppressive today, but she does so without demanding the annihilation of the people who make up this state. As in the experience of working on the parents’ council, she wants to get along with every cold eye, assessing the reality before and during conflict that, paradoxically, can act as an integrating force. (“I had to be able to move and talk to all of them, because we were all in one place, in this same school and we had children in the same school”). “We, the parents” are heard in her statements, always with the observation that “we are the same citizens, regardless of belonging to any organization”.

It appears that Loboda and many other parents living in Poland nowadays create the third kind of Biesta’s public pedagogies. This pedagogy manifests as their permanent striving for being together in the public sphere where „action is possible, and freedom can appear”. The discourse of possibility of action and freedom, and the emphasis on the importance of an educational and political interruption make this public pedagogy of parents explicitly close to Biesta’s concept. One could say that this parents’ leader is practicing her interruptions and manifesting disagreement with the condition of public space imposed by the rulers. Thus, she is redefining education as a task that requires a critical approach and the practice of interruptions.

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