

THE HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDING OF SCHOOL FAILURE IN BRAZIL

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ABSTRACT

This text, organized in three parts, discusses how the idea of school failure has been approached in Brazil. In the first part, the author addresses the conditions under which studies about school failure have been conducted in Brazil, focusing on the historical meaning of its use as a notion for analysis. The second part examines some of the material produced about the subject, in the form of research conducted in Brazil or translations of foreign research into Portuguese, in order to problematize the way in which its history has been most commonly recorded. The third part proposes that the mobilization of the population for education in São Paulo, from the 1970's to the 1980's, is a relevant explanatory element, yet one that is lacking in the reflections about the elaboration of the notion of school failure as an analytical category in education.

SCHOLAR FAILURE • SCHOOLING • HISTORY OF EDUCATION •
EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

SCHOOL FAILURE IS A RECENT IDEA AND, AS ISLAMBERT-JAMATI (1985B) AND PROST (1985) suggest, is related to the historical conditions under which a discourse has been produced about the effects of the massive presence of students from underprivileged backgrounds in school. But, most of all, it has been a phenomenon posed as a question by a sociology particularly interested in analyzing the effects of social inequalities on education. The succession of studies published by Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron (1964a, 1964b, 1970) and Bourdieu, Passeron and Saint-Martin (1965), from 1964 to 1970, practically defined the terms of the discussion about the social meaning of school selection. As Nogueira and Catani (1998, p. 9) underlined, these are works that break with explanations founded on natural abilities or the “gift” and show the mechanisms through which “the education system turns the differences stemming from family transmission of cultural heritage into inequalities of school fate”. In many ways, Bourdieu, together with Passeron (1964a, 1964b, 1970, 1975), Alain Darbel (1966) and Luc Boltanski and M. de Saint-Martin (1973), explores the situations in which school action proves very inequitable, either because it acts on individuals previously gifted by family action or because it turns inequalities regarding culture into success inequalities.¹ From the frequency of visits to museums to the entry into higher education and job market, a series of indications is analyzed to show how school protects social, economic and cultural privileges rather than their open transmission. Particularly, failure

¹ Note also other collaborations in Bourdieu (1966), Bourdieu, Boltanski and Saint-Martin (1973) and Bourdieu and Saint-Martin.

to reach “this or that branch of higher education and succeed in it” and school dropout have provided clues to research on the selection operations through which, under the appearance of a formal equity, the education system performs its social conservation role.

The subject was not integrated into the historiography of education which, albeit heedful of the school population’s specific properties, statistics (cf. CANDEIAS, 1996; LUC, 1987) and schooling conditions (PROST, 1968, 1970), has not described the relationship between its central elements or documented its main cycles. Most of all, school failure still has not become a historiographic problem, as was the case with sociology or psychology. History has provided no explanation that might reveal differences with regard to the continuities and unities that found the analyses on grade retention, school dropout, reading competence indices produced in school or learning failure. Moreover, historiography has not lent itself to evidencing the limits of meaning concerning the sociological and psychological models of explanation, by way of a locus of “control” in which these models are experienced in fields extrinsic to their elaboration, according to Certau’s (2007, p. 88) understanding of historical practice. Nor have there been the necessary efforts to reveal the deviations, the exceptions, that the application of demographic, sociological, or even psychological models causes to appear in many domains of documentation.² And, like so many other objects of history, this is a phenomenon that does not exist out of the categories of perception that isolate it, nor out of the mechanisms from which it operates – in this case, the school selection mechanisms of grade retention and exclusion.

In any case, this is not a history that has not been problematized. On the one hand, the kind of denunciation of school as an ideological state apparatus which organized studies like those of Baudelot and Establet (1971) and Bowles and Gintis (1976) sustains a self-righteous history.³ It is not just that school has the role of inculcating the bourgeois ideology; its mission is to reinforce the marginality that is produced in the capitalist system. On the other hand, the more insular versions of the history of education that have come to us from psychology, sociology or didactics, encourage us, in a rarefied way, to investigate school failure. By means of a retrospective look, explanations for the present are sought in history, generally at the cost of syntheses that smooth down, suppress or ignore the controversies, the facts that are not convenient to the explanation (RAVON, 2000). On yet another hand, in curricular guides, a historical interpretation has been circulating which is politically committed to the management of today’s education systems. In 2008, for example, the curricular reorientation of public state schools in the state of São Paulo was justified by an autocratic

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In his respect, the studies of Bernard Lahire (1997) about the school success of students from lower classes provide a partial questioning of Bourdieu’s theory of legitimacy.

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In 2002, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis revisited *Schooling in Capitalist America*, and mainly recognized the scarce attention they had given to schooling agents in building a society that is more capable of expanding material freedoms and benefits for all, and thus, to the contradictory pressures operating in schools. These questions are also discussed in Cole (1988).

perception that schools' autonomy to define their own pedagogical plans had proved insufficient over time.

This description is certainly elementary. It is worth adding, at least, that psychologists, sociologists and educators have broadly demonstrated the inextricable imbrication that exists in learning between students' social background, the school system of action and the conflicts through which this system is built and lasts over time. In this *démarche* of analyses, nuances were not ignored concerning the notion of "school failure", so conceived as a set of facts reducible to the causal context that should explain them. However, the understanding of school failure has its history and, therefore, it seems reasonable to me to deal with the uses of the term instead of taking it as a concept derived from a theoretical model. This is the purpose of this essay: to distinguish the uses, to approach something of the differences of analyses that the notion of school failure has brought about in research of schooling processes in the last few decades of the last century. This is not, however, a conjunctural study, but mainly a localized effort to understand the questions related to how meaning was operated for this notion in Brazil. Therefore, this text, organized in three parts, examines how the idea of school failure has been put in question and researched among us. In the first part, I explore the conditions under which studies about school failure have been conducted in Brazil, focusing on the historical meaning of its use as a notion for analysis. In the second part, I approach some of the material produced about the subject, in the form of research conducted in Brazil or translations of foreign research into Portuguese, in order to problematize the way in which its history has been most commonly recorded. The third part proposes that the mobilization of the population for education in São Paulo, from the 1970's to the 1980's, is a relevant explanatory element, yet one that is lacking in the reflections about the elaboration of the notion of school failure as an analytical category in education. Thus, it aims to grasp something of the "gaps" that worm into various areas of documentation.

THE UNDERSTANDING OF SCHOOL FAILURE

In Brazil, concerns about school failure as an object of study emerge in different contexts of educational research in the 1970's/1980's. The state-of-the-art studies on the subject conducted by Maria Helena Souza Patto (1988) and Carla Biancha Angelucci *et al.* (2004) are very instructive about the predominant circumstances of the research output. The way in which Patto (1988) exposes her understanding of school failure maps the institutional aspects and the thematic and theoretical-political ruptures that organized research about school failure in the period. It is a sound itinerary about the conditions of this output and which, as

Aparecida Joly Gouveia (1971) warns, took form from the relationship established with the previous output. Therefore, I will follow her.

First, then, the ruptures. From the thematic perspective, research perceives “the participation of school itself in the results it achieves, after many years in which there was a predominant psychologization of school failure and a search for its causes, particularly out of the school system” (PATTO, 1988, p. 75). Even though recognizing this was a tendency present in the writings of progressive education authors from the 1920’s to the 1950’s, she distinguishes: “now it no longer has the essayistic character, and expresses itself in the form of empirical research on what became known as intra-school factors” (PATTO, 1988, p. 75). In turn, the theoretical rupture, according to Patto (1988) underlies in a political rupture: this production overcomes the liberal concept of the role of school. It no longer sees school education as the vanguard of social reforms, and expresses itself in two ways. Initially, the critical-reproductivist one, which “founded essays and research reports in which the constitutive practices of school life were understood solely as supporters of the prevalent social order” (PATTO, 1988, p. 76). Later, with the critique of reproductivism, “school came to be seen as a place that could be put in tune with the transformation of class society” (PATTO, 1988, p. 76). In the late 1980’s, the kind of gap that existed between the Marxist macrostructural conceptualization and the studies of school life produced a new swing of attention, this time towards everyday life. Mainly, the search for the ways in which variables external to the school system articulate with schooling-internal factors led studies to include the speech of those who participate in school life, by means of non-quantitative procedures of discourse analysis (ANGELUCCI *et al.*, 2004, p. 65).

In institutional terms, the importance of the publications of the Carlos Chagas Foundation (FCC) in consolidating a different research standard than the one kept by institutions like the National Institute of Pedagogical Studies (INEP) and the Brazilian Center for Educational Research (CBPE) constitutes a first aspect. From 1977 to 1981, the research projects conducted by the FCC propose alternative models to the heavily psychological reading of the school education process or to the functionalist model of social sciences that, still in the 1970’s, dominated educational research in the governmental sphere. Thus, Angelucci *et al.* (2004) believe that the FCC’s *Cadernos de Pesquisa* paved the way for approaching school reality from historical materialism. The consolidation of graduate and research programs contributed to generalize critical conceptions of school from the 1970’s to the 1980’s. The prominence conferred by Angelucci *et al.* (2004) on the University of São Paulo (USP), the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo and the FCC fails to comprise the fronts that graduate programs at other

universities and research centers then opened, but it reminds us of a second institutional aspect that was relevant to research on school failure. Universities and foundations had prominence in studying education in the critique of the presuppositions contained in the technical-managerial decisions that aimed to overcome the difficulties of a schooling still based on racial and social prejudice. Such prominence defined a horizon of research. Most of all, from university research in that period came another set of categories for understanding school failure, in parallel with the one that authorities and government agencies used to deal with the school apparatus.

If I am being true to Patto's (1988) study, there are two types of dislocations in understanding school failure. One that starts from the search for determinants of school underachievement in variables external to the school system, and from causal relationships between negative influences of ethnic and social groups and school performance to understand the intra-school factors. Thus, the studies based on human capital and cultural lack theories were followed by a greater attention to the participation of school itself in the results achieved in it. Another movement takes place as a rupture with the liberal conception of the social role of school, and it was the result of the emphasis given to the reproduction paradigms in the debate about educational inequalities in the turn from the 1970's to the 1980's. Particularly, the reproductivist critique provided support to a change of interpretive perspective that begins to see school as an apparatus for maintaining social order, and no longer as an attribute of transformation. In contrast, the critique that comes after reproductivism restores the role of school as a condition for the democratization of opportunities, yet without overrating its roles in social change, so that another threshold of understanding was crossed with the use of theoretical-methodological sources in ethnographic research of school. In an attempt to "overcome the gap between the Marxist macrostructural concepts and the conceptual needs brought about by the study of school life" (ANGELUCCI *et al.*, 2004, p. 57-58), research and reflection about school failure ran the risk of contributing to the political construction of a democratic school.

THE PROBLEMATIC HISTORY OF A PROBLEM

Around the scheme given by Patto (1988) and Angelucci *et al.* (2004), it is even possible to organize a panorama of the material produced among us under the theme of school failure, in the form of research conducted in Brazil or translation of foreign research. Thus, the first dislocation, i.e., from the search for variables external to the school system to understanding the intra-school factors, opposes the primacy of psychology, a sociology of the school exemplified in the works of Dorith

Schneider (1974) and Luiz Pereira (1967). These works counter the discourses about cultural deprivation and the theories of compensatory education that were surreptitiously spread in Brazil by governmental programs. In the second dislocation, understood as one of overcoming the liberal conception of school failure by a Marxist perspective, the reproduction paradigm and Bourdieu's theories predominated. *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, by Bourdieu and Passeron, had its Portuguese translation published in Brazil in 1975 and, since then, the discussion around the key ideas of their theory animated political-theoretical efforts that were central to the studies of Luiz Antônio Cunha (1977), Dermeval Saviani (1982), Maurício Tragtenberg (1978) and even Maria Helena Souza Patto (1991).

Maria Alice Nogueira (1990, p. 56) is very right when she says that those new theories came to counter the reformist ideology of research and policies for fighting school inequalities, and that the predominance of Marxist thought in the intellectual circles of the period played a singular role in the critique of how they were carried out. It was in the period of the dictatorship-democracy transition administrations, from 1982 to 1989, that research from this perspective was published about various aspects of school inequalities: access and permanence (BRANDÃO; BAETA; ROCHA, 1983), performance (KRAMER, 1982), trajectories (PATTO, 1991). Also amidst these concerns, works by Forquin (1992), Petitat (1994) and Willis (1991) acquire relevance for thinking about the problematics established with the debate about educational inequalities and the conditions for democratizing school opportunities, and they are translated.

More than treating the developments generated to the field of educational research by this kind of theoretical mobilization vis-à-vis the problems of schooling, it is necessary to interrupt here, because the main aspect of the argument is already posed. Retrospectively, the perception one has of research on school failure is that it breaks, in a political, theoretical and methodological way, with a progressive education-type liberalism. Even according to the kinds of rupture and thresholds that were then necessarily crossed, which are so well identified in the balances produced by Patto (1988) and Angelucci *et al.* (2004), I do not think that this is the point of cleavage. The way Anísio Teixeira worked in central education management agencies blurs this picture in at least two aspects. First, in his report of 1935, Anísio Teixeira saw clearly that the failed student did not mean a success of the selecting apparatus that school then was or once had been. Given the outcomes of achievement tests administered in 1933-1934, he saw that failure was an index of failure on the part of the institution and the school system in these terms:

It is not enough that there be schools for the more capable, it is indispensable that there be schools for all. It is not enough that there be schools for all, it is indispensable that all learn.

It is not difficult to evaluate how much the modification has come to influence the concept of the school's performance. Previously, given its selective character, failure was almost the education quality index. If many failed, that meant the judgement criteria were really efficient, and for educating the intellectual and professional elites, the very cream of the population was being depurated.

If, however, the school's duty is to teach everybody, because everybody needs the fundamental elements of culture to live in modern society, then the problem is reversed. A failed student no longer means a success of the selecting apparatus, but the failure of the institution for fundamental preparation of citizens, men and women, for common life. (TEIXEIRA, 1935, p. 74)

Later, the CBPE sustained an experimentalist research perspective that, if not free from the themes of backwardness and cultural and school conditions of modernization, has redefined the relationship between “empirical research” and “generalization” in the field of education. Building on the anthropological concept of culture (XAVIER, 1999; FREITAS, 2001), the CBPE developed, in different regions of the country, a series of community studies. In these works’ approach, it was noteworthy to Xavier (1999, p. 96) that their effort to “potentize the use and social effectiveness of school” caused the understanding of its social role to be reversed: “from an acculturation agent”, it became an “enculturation space”. As Mendonça (2008) stresses, the CBPE constituted, along this line, a research tradition that ended up being erased from the history of our education. Most of all, Mendonça (2008) perceives, in the simplistic way in which the liberal legacy’s contributions to Brazilian education were understood, the main aspect of this erasing. Identified with the technical-bureaucratic perspective imposed over the post-1964 period, the current represented by Anísio Teixeira’s thought historically became an “unfortunate tradition” in Brazil (LOVISOLO, 1990; MENDONÇA, 2008, p. 61).

Still, on the one hand, there was already on the part of Anísio Teixeira the concern with intra-school failure and dropout factors since the reform of public education in the federal capital. It is also worth remembering that the studies of Luiz Pereira (1967) were produced at the São Paulo regional office of the CBPE. Therefore, the understanding of school failure as a failure on the part of the school, and not of the individual child and his family, was already more than a mere “a tendency present in the writings of progressive education authors”, it was a stand that had been taken in the educational debate

since the late 1930's among the so-called liberals. On the other hand, the works of Inep and CBPE opened fronts of study that did more than "provide data for educational policy". As Xavier (1999) and Freitas (2001) show, these were agencies through which Anísio Teixeira established covenants with researchers and institutions in Europe and the United States and tried to redirect educational research. Thus, the presence of old-school progressive education authors in publications of INEP and CBPE (Fernando de Azevedo, Almeida Jr., Lourenço Filho) coexisted side by side with the empirical research of universities at the time. Around CBPE projects, researchers at USP, University of Brazil and the Free School of Sociology and Politics worked, publishing their findings in the *Educação e Ciências Sociais* journal and in various series of the collection of CBPE publications, and in the *Revista Brasileira de Estudos Pedagógicos*. Along with foreign researchers, the intellectuals articulated by Anísio Teixeira constituted another standard in making sociology. According to Xavier (1999, p. 93), from a matrix then considered the most modern and scientific came research based on the methods of case study and participant observation, life history, in addition to surveys and interviews, and with a new thematic universe: investigations about the community, racial relations, assimilation and acculturation and social mobility.

FAILURE AND THE DEFETISHIZATION OF SCHOOL KNOWLEDGE

My purpose in so examining one the signatories of the Manifest of the Progressive Education Pioneers, however, is not to push back to the 1930's or to personalize in Anísio Teixeira what I called the cleavage point. I agree with Patto (1988) and Angelucci *et al.* (2004) that it is from the second half of the 1970's that a new tendency in educational research imposes itself among us. But I do not think the perspective change in research about the student's failure at school was the result of overcoming the liberal conception of education. In my view, "the historical conditions under which [another] discourse has been produced about the effects of the massive presence of students from underprivileged backgrounds in school" (Islambart-Jamati, 1985a, 1985b; Prost, 1985) occur by means of manifestations and a greater visibility of popular struggles. I rely mainly on the information of Marília Pontes Sposito (1993, p. 85-86) that, by the mid-1970's, the repercussion of the incipient organization of popular movements in struggles for educations was already noticeable. In the city of São Paulo, the participation of groups who opposed the authoritarian regime, clandestine left-wing parties and, particularly, the support of the Catholic Church in disseminating the Basic Ecclesial Communities, fomented the creation of community centers, mothers'

clubs and residents' associations that were very active in demanding public education. In the same way as Kowarick (1984), Macedo (1986), Sposati (1976), Sposito (1993) and Telles (1987) examined the popular struggles in the 1970's, perceiving them as producers of forms of sociability that were decisive for conquering rights systematically denied to the majority of the population. Sposito's (1993) research about the struggle for education in popular movements in São Paulo shows, amidst a process of social struggle, the practices that give meaning to the specific pursuit of a right denied. And yet she concludes: the dream of having more with access to education, the perception that it is the lack of school and its knowledge that determines poverty, collides with the small routine of schools: the state of buildings, the organization of school time, the relationships in the classroom (SPOSITO, 1993, p. 372).

As we consider that these practices contribute to evidence the tension between dream and reality, the cleavage occurs in the demand. On the one hand, and according to Pierre Bourdieu's (2000, p. 125) argument, the collective reappropriation of the power over the principles for building a collectivity's own identity begins with the public demand for making itself recognized. In many ways, Sposito's (1993) study shows some of the achievements, but mainly difficulties and frustrations involved in doing so. Among these, children from working families refusing schooling is the one that best defines the social inflection of that moment. The incompatibility between their life conditions and school finds expression in the disenchantment and disbelief in initial expectations about schooling, in indiscipline, in school dropout. In Sposito's (1993, p. 381) view of these questions, a defetishization process about school knowledge takes place. On the other hand, in a well-known interpretation of the role of school in educating social classes and hierarchies, the conversion of the school problems of dropout and grade retention into social problems contains another significant inflection. Chapoulie and Briand (1994) understand school failure as a problem that does not exist but in relation to school as an institution. It is a phenomenon that emerges when schooling is mandatory during a long period, and whose definition, however, "is broadly concealed from the eyes of those who, because they are within the school space, do not realize how much the definition is owing to the institutional context in which they manifest themselves" (CHAPOULIE; BRIAND, 1994, p. 37). Thus, and differently than the perspective explored by Sposito (1993), Chapoulie and Briand (1994) perceive, in the uneasiness about the problems of school dropout and grade retention, not a defetishization of school knowledge, but the importance of school in building our social classifications. This is a domain of public controversy in which the collective action of various categories of school agents (managers, teachers and also the public

in general) becomes a concrete problem of institutional functioning turned into a social problem. Indeed, as Vincent, Lahire e Thin (2001, p. 39) argue, the designation and interpretation of, and initiatives to overcome phenomena like illiteracy or school failure depend on a school-based approach to social realities. They are right when they say that “school classifications are social classifications, whose effects are felt in domains of social life separated from the school domain and will go on well beyond the end of one’s schooling” (VINCENT; LAHIRE; THIN, 2001, p. 38).

The defetishization of school knowledge is the first form assumed by the acknowledgement of the phenomenon of school failure as a failure on the part of school. This attitude towards school has a corresponding theoretical existence that, according to Bourdieu (2000, p. 136), is characteristic of theories: the product of an explanatory classification that allows explaining and predicting the practices and properties of the things classified. I see in this “junction” of factual and theoretical perceptions of school practice the combination that determines the rupture point of the discourse about the effects of the massive presence of students from underprivileged backgrounds in school. In the France of Antoine Prost, Bernard Lahire and Guy Vincent, Pierre Bourdieu and Viviane Islambart-Jamati, the university crisis of the 1960’s was the terrain for this graft between factual and theoretical perceptions about the form of schooling. Likewise, the first moves of the New Sociology of Education, from 1967 to 1976, took place amidst the radicalism of students’ counterculture in British and American universities. The increasingly evident social pressures in response to the new types of industrialization and against racial discrimination and forms of male domination provoked change in the relationship between politics and school practices. Among us, it seems to me that the popular mobilization for schooling from the 1970’s to the 1980’s were the main vector of this convergence of representations about the educative process that perceives school failure as a result of the form of schooling. At least this is indicated in the ways the term is used since then. Studies that break with the assumption that grade retention and school dropout occur because children would not be ready enough to profit from school received as much dedication as other concomitant categories of comprehension, such as economic discrimination (CUNHA, 1970), cultural marginalization (POPPOVIC, 1972) and even school dropout and grade retention (PINHEIRO, 1971; SANTOS, 1971).

I believe the notion of school failure participates in what Bourdieu once called a “social consciousness of the moment” and is therefore the result of the elaboration of an instrument of construction of the social reality it contributes to evidence. In this perspective, the rupture which then becomes established in educational research is not

only related to the historical conditions of the emergence of this notion of school failure, but it also provides this notion with the proposition forms considered valid, the types of inference one can resort to, the rules of generalization of its working categories. In any case, and to return to Bourdieu, a history of this way of understanding school failure warns us that, like so many other social problems, it “was socially produced, in a collective work of building the social reality and by means of this work” (BOURDIEU, 2000, p. 37). We can see that, to Bourdieu (2000, p. 37), the interest of a history concerned with understanding why and how things are understood is focused on what necessarily had to be, so that what was and might have remained a private problem could become a social problem. And as Sposito’s (1993) study and Carlos Chagas Foundation’s research show, “it took meetings, commissions, associations, movements, manifestations, petitions, requests, deliberations, votes, position takings, projects, programs, resolutions, etc.” (BOURDIEU, 2000, p. 37). The bureaucracy, the legislation or, in sum, the traces that this set of tasks produces were not gathered in the form of documentation by historiography with a concern for understanding school failure. And yet the historical discussion of a problem of this kind not only prevents the dangers for the sociologist to be condemned to be just an instrument of what he wants to think, as Bourdieu (2000, p. 36) warns, it also makes us aware of the risk of naturalizing the past, a risk run by demands in the education area when they seek, through a retrospective look, explanations for the present.

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