Challenges to Children's Autonomy in a Brazilian State School

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ABSTRACT

Children's autonomy has stood as a main goal in the process of educational transmission understood as an increasing capacity on children's part to share the normative encodings of social life supported by the self's rational choice. This notion of autonomy leads to a reified view of human capacities over and above cultural and contextual particularities that, in fact, determine how subjects seek to understand norms in face of the ever changing demands of social life. Based on a one year long empirical research, using a variety of ethnographic approaches, this paper problematizes such a notion of autonomy and analyses how youth of a state school in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, voice their demands and dissatisfactions and question the status quo. The preservation of the social imaginary of distinctiveness and past achievements of the school was found to hinder feelings and opinions of disapproval by students and devalue unanticipated and novel situations felt to be disruptive and menacing. Tensions in the school social dynamics were fuelled towards an arena over which the students could find no interference from teachers and could manage by themselves: that of peer relationships and friendships.

BACKGROUND OF THE PRESENT RESEARCH

For long my interest has focused on the issue of children's participation in schools. The investigation I conducted in private and state schools in the city of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, between 2006-10, provided interesting results (Castro & al., 2012). They pointed at a predominant view of students' participation coalescing with their position as learners. Students viewed their participation as coinciding with teachers' expectations towards them: dedication to the studies, obedience to norms, cooperation with the elders' requests. Although this was found to be the hegemonic view, it did not contribute to a peaceful and harmonious school environment. Along with group discussions with children our research teamlistened to their grievances, frustrations and complaints about being unfairly treated and having to acquiesce to unreasonable demands. They questioned some of the rules they were constrained to obey as well as the crystallized

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position of the pupil before often inattentive and condescending teachers. Thus, though cognitively and consciously students' views of participation were conventional, they also expressed their unease and indignation as to how the relationships between teachers and students were structured. However, when they were confronted with the opportunity to say what and how they would like tochange, they often ended up by dropping any initiative or hope to make changes for fear they would lack the capacity to reach an agreement among them. Along with the discussions they expressed so many different views that they feared that a chaotic situation might take place if they were convoked to make any changes in school norms.

On the other hand, in the teachers' eyes, students' criticism lacked legitimation and was often dismissed because, as children, they were not considered capable of expressing adequate demands and voicing their interests appropriately. As learners, they were at school to follow adults' orientations.

The overall normative view held by teachers was that children were not sufficiently qualified as moral and psychological agents as to bear their own claims. School norms should be provided to them being secured by the adults who should deal with any disputes as pedagogical opportunities for children to learn discipline rather than to question the status quo. Thus, it seemed that students' convocation to participate in the process of discussing, negotiating and thereby, understanding the norms whereby their conduct was evaluated looked remote.

On the part of the students, there were grievances and anger for not being heard and taken into due consideration, but also feelings of impotence, apathy and passivity which were conducive to an attitude of resentful acceptance of the status quo. On the part of the teachers, a rigid outlook concerning their position as authorities in the educational context led to a non-reflexive and impermeable attitude vis-à-vis students' demands and new emergent conditions of school life. The impasse pointed at the difficulties with respect to the pacts that were supposed to regulate youth's conduct at school,as well as the values and norms that were supposed to inspire their motives to be at school and make it a worthwhile place to be at.

This imbroglio led us to interrogate the notion of autonomy and its relevance as to guide educational action at schools. For many teachers autonomy is understood as the process whereby children internalize social norms transmitted by their elders who know more and better than they. Children learn to adjust themselves to an inherited corpus of norms of conduct which, being already there, are supposed to be adequate and fair. In the teachers' eyes autonomy is a moral and psychological attribute to be learnt by children as they submit themselves to the social norms and make them their own. In this vein, there should be no a priori reason for children to question the status quo and pose demands different than those already anticipated and attended to.

The development of autonomy is seen to parallel the development of reason, in the way conceptualized by Piaget (1994) and Kohlberg (1984). Schools have been institutions devoted to foster the intellectual and moral development of children, one of the important aspects being the development of autonomy. This has meant in practical terms that norms and values governing conducts in schools consist the instituted background - the common good - by which all, teachers and pupils, should abide. However, it is teachers that are in the position to enforce and interpret rules whereas pupils should obey and acquiesce to their demands.

However, many questions need to be posed: should the common good be undisputable? Should not children have a say about it? Have teachers thought about what is fair and adequate, or are they themselves just being commanded by norms emanating from higher instances? How is the common good of schools established? What can then constitute autonomous action in schools today?

The present study sought to explore answers to these questions looking at the results of an intervention-based research project conducted at a state school in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, along the year of 2012. Our research sought to interrogate about the conditions which are likely to foster autonomy in students and teachers, and what are the difficulties in the Brazilian educational context and of state schools, in particular, which hinder and prevent autonomous social action. How autonomy is understood in our project is spelled out in the next section.

Autonomy in schools: from reified reason towards struggles for meaning and action

Autonomy has been a notion that has been assimilated into a most wide range of disciplines: law, ethics, philosophy, psychology, sociology, political sciences. It has referred to a state to be sought for by individuals, groups, countries and organizations. Etymologically, it derives from the Greek *autos,* meaning by oneself, and law, which comes to mean *giving oneself one's law.* Traditionally, it expresses the condition whereby a person or a collective can determine the laws by which to bind to. Throughout the history of philosophy the term autonomy has received different connotations, but it has kept its central meaning of a condition of being free from undue coercions on thoughts or actions so that one can do what is reasonable, or what makes one happy.

With the philosopher Immanuel Kant the notion of autonomy gained the status of a categorical imperative of reason, *to act according to a rule that can become universal.* Therefore, reason can inform us about what should be done irrespective of who is the agent, and direct our will to do it. The autonomous will acts out of a moral duty and confers dignity to those abiding to a universal ruleby one's own consent. Kant's conception of autonomy has been criticized on account of neglecting the social and cultural aspects of knowledge/morality construction (Mackenzie and Stoljar, 2000; Nedelsky, 1989) thereby viewing the

development of the cognitive ego disconnected of disputes over what constitutes important values in different social groups (Benjamin, 1988).

Rather than the activity of an abstract and essentialized reason, which can be reified in a specific format over and above its cultural determinants, we regard autonomy as the activity of collectives striving to discuss and define norms that regulate their social life. The arbitrariness of the *nomos* is put into question. Therefore, rule questioning and rule reinventing become the most crucial aspect that embed autonomy in its constituting ground. Social regulation, or the normative basis of social life, constitutes an arena of divergent meanings and demands and, consequently, of unending conflict.

If schools are oriented to foster autonomy then, first of all, rules that govern school life should be regarded as the focus of permanent dispute and construction. Rather than considering the exceptionality of this situation, and pathologizing it, the core of institutional life should deal with the double-bind aspect of autonomy, namely, the instituting and the instituted, as Castoriadis put it (1982; 1997). As children question the status quo and the norms by which they should abide, they are acting out autonomy in a most important sense which is to introduce their partial (is not always so?) point of view on school affairs. As teachers put themselves in the position of enforcing the 'universal norms' and coerce the instituting movements of children, they are in fact securing the heteronomy of rules by imposing them on children. As life in schools become ever more oriented and ordained according to a programmed schedule of actions to reach predetermined results, less and less relevance is given to the instituting emergent conditions which, bringing forth what is unforeseen and unexpected, can vivify the often sterile air of school life. In the same vein, less and less time is devoted to autotelic conversation and interaction conducive to moral decisions which can be sustained by all.

Investigating autonomy in schools:
is there any room for the instituting act of renewing the norms by which we live?

Our empirical investigation sought to explore the existing conditions in a state school in Brazil which contribute to autonomous action which, rather than submitting unquestioningly to the regulative *modus operandi* of the school, brings forth new demands and interrogations about its instituted reality. A complex and delicate network of standpoints - teachers', pupils', parents', staff's and those of higher-order instances - is interwoven together creating a sort of balance through which school routines can be accomplished and school life can be reproduced. Therefore, as we entered our selected school in order to conduct our investigation we were aware of the difficulties that such an enterprise posed.

The school where we conducted our investigation is a big state school in the municipality of Caxias in the state of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. It has about 2,000 students

enrolled from the fifth year (10 years of age) to the end of secondary education (18 years of age). Most of the students come from lower social classes, whose parents work either in blue collar, or low white collar occupations. They are of different ethnic backgrounds: whites, browns and blacks, a typical recruitment in state schools but which is unusual in private schools of mostly upper class student recruitment. In 2012 the school was celebrating its 50th anniversary and included many festivities in the school calendar. The research group, for whom the author of the present work stands as the leader, has been doing research in this school for over six years in an intermittent basis.

Along with conversations with the staff at the beginning of the year, the research group understood that there was a high expectation on the staff's part that the 50th anniversary of the school should be included as a major guideline in the planning of our intervention research strategies. From January to December 2012 the research team worked at this school. From March to May, institutional contacts, participant observation and informal interviews with students were carried out. In June during the week where the apex of the festivities took place, we set up an interactive installation called the Time Tunnel in the play ground of the school. During August and September we organized some activities in order to talk back to the students what we had observed along the Time Tunnel installation. In October we were there to call students for a musical workshop which took place in December. Throughout the year we maintained permanent contact with the staff concerning what we were doing and how. In the last week of December a preliminary report of our results was shared with the staff.

What I present next consists of a preliminary analysis of this year's intervention aiming at two major aspects. First, students' and teachers' bond to the school was examined as a relevant condition for understanding how new demands and expectations could be integrated in school routines or, on the contrary, were considered too menacing and disturbing so as to be maintained under control. The social imaginary of the school became the key mediating aspect to highlight the dynamics between instituting movements, and its opposite, the corroborating movements to preserve the status quo. Secondly, some tensions and contradictions are explored which seem indicative of the difficulties which render autonomous action of students and teachers less likely to take place.

The social imaginary of the school: 'This is more than a school, it's a second home...'

We understand by social imaginary the production of collective beliefs and images whereby social groups can operate their communication and establish discursive realities (Anderson, 1983; Castoriadis, 1982; Durand, 2000). Along our one year's stay at this school we had different and many opportunities to talk with students and teachers about their school views and what their experience of studying or teaching there was like. Most specially, during the week of the 50th anniversary celebration, when we installed

a Time Tunnel barrack in the school play ground, students were invited to look at old school photos hanging on the walls of the barrack and, then, write notes on a flip-board about how they perceived the changes the school had undergone.

What drew our attention in the very first contacts with the staff was the overall highly praising discourse with which school staff described school activities and staff endeavours. This school stood out not only as a long-established traditional institution in the municipality but one which was recognized as being the top one, or one of the top among state schools, sought for by those parents who wanted to give good education for their children. Moreover, many staff had gone to this school as they were kids, and referred to the school as a big extended community united by affective and sentimental links. Being so, social bonds were not primarily based and regulated by an agenda of professional duties, but rather by the expected reciprocity of emotional ties. For instance, as one of vice-heads became ill on account of overwork, the others felt that they should take up her work, firstly because as friends this was what they were supposed to do, secondly, because of their love of the school which demanded their readiness not to let things go astray. The school climate was impregnated by an air of grandeur, given its tradition and its ranking as a good educational establishment that had to be maintained at all costs. The importance of the celebration of its 50th anniversary highlighted the cherished position occupied by this school in town.

On the other hand, students expressed, in the same vein, the praising and somewhat reverent discourse about the school. To be there was to be able to obtain a good education (which very often is not possible in state schools in Brazil) and to succeed in finding a good job afterwards. To be there was to be given the rare opportunity of becoming part of this 'big family', and as such, as one student put it, *'to be recognized as someone smart'*. The most conspicuous face of such a belonging was the uniform, which was different from any other school uniform in town.

As part of the activities of the Time Tunnel activity students were invited to look at old school photos and comment on the differences and similarities between now and then. The photos were new to the students and caused much surprise. Most students reacted in a praising and, at the same time, standardized attitude; very few of them felt provoked to produce something more personal as they were confronted by unexpected aspects of the school - its old practices, styles of dressing and so forth. There was a general acquiescence to the status of uncontested distinction of the school, students' expressions reverberating in an almost stereotyped way how they *'loved to be at this school'*, how much *'the school was to be congratulated on its anniversary'*, how they felt proud to study there and receive all the benefits of such a good education. At a later occasion, as we got back to them presenting what they had produced in the Time Tunnel activity, some of them could voice some incipient disagreement concerning how the school was

managed, but they were very brief and tended to be aborted by their peers' criticism. In these situations we could note that in order to feel part of the big family students had to show loyalty and adhesion, so that an attitude of gratitude to be there did not go well with criticism or disagreement.

The instituted reality of this school represented by a social imaginary of distinction hindered students and teachers alike from questioning how things were as they were, even when dissatisfaction and frustration confronted their allegiance to the school. Teachers and students referred to this school as a *'second home'* alluding to relationships bonded by loyalty and gratitude. In this sense, the modus operandi of the school had to be preserved because this seemed to warrant its very tradition and distinctiveness. Thus, to maintain the *status quo* and an ambiance of *containment* with respect to emergent demands was cultivated in order to effectively control turbulences. For students, corroborating rather than showing dissent enhanced their self-esteem and their hopes of a good future. As children and youth who could profit from a good state education - an infrequent situation for badly-off kids - they should comply rather than complain. For teachers, the long cherished representation of the school sustained their faith that nothing had changed in state education, and in that school in particular, even if they had to do whatever personal sacrifices in order to preserve their views. Unanticipated change became a phantom of disorder and chaos, and eventually, the moving downwards in the ladder of educational recognition and distinctiveness.

In search of autonomy: between containment and disruption

If explicit negative comments about the school tended to occur very occasionally and generate suspicion and unease among students, this does not mean that tensions and ambivalence were not present.

The interactive installation of the Time Tunnel activity during the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the school was intended to provoke students by dislocating them from their existential present towards the institutional past of the school in order to propitiate affections and reflectionsabout their experience to be there. After viewing the exhibition of the old school photos, the students were asked to write down their impressions on a flip-board set up on a table outside the Time Tunnel barrack. They were also asked, if they wished, to take photos of the school and comment on its actual state. To our surprise, the old photo exhibition did not provoke students' action as we expected. Few students looked at all the photos, fewer were keen on writing about them at all. What was astonishing was their actions towards writing on the flip-board as if what was of importance was the act of writing itself and leaving one's marks on this "talking paper". Some students rushed to call their friends who did not even care to look at the photos to write. There was such a commotion around writing on the flip-

board that the research team feared the paper of the flip-board would run out. Even the use of the camera to take photos of the school came in secondary place as compared to the enthusiasm the students showed regarding the flip-board.

Thus, the research team was convoked to understand this unanticipated situation which had led us astray from our objectives. We were before a process where the materiality of the flip-board had turned things upside down. Miller's discussion of the process of objectification was of help to understand how the flip-board, in its agentic potential, *gave form toalacritous students who were giving form to their expressions about the school*, "a circular process at which level we cannot differentiate either subjects per se or objects per se" (2005:14). The flip-board produced those students - not the ones we were expecting - and made possible another way of *being and speaking whatever they wanted* about the school anniversary. Communication among students, and also between them and the research team, was made possible by the act of writing on the flip-board. The flip-board had become a "thing in the world", as Ingold (2012) reminds us of the life potential of materials as they circulate and allow for the creation of new forms of life and action. Again, as Miller remarked, we were led to understand how "social relations exist in and through our material worlds in entirely unexpected ways that cannot be traced back to some clear sense of will or intention (2005:32)."

What the flip-board conveyed in terms of the students' writings was already commented on before: there was a profusion of students' exclamations of their good fate to study at this school, their expressions of congratulations on the school anniversary and also students' signatures and messages with their emails and facebook addresses. What was noteworthy was how the flip-board was functionalized to collude sign - the allusion to the student's presence by the writing -, and the signified - the presence of the students themselves, giving way to their massive presence permitted by the installation activity. If it seems plausible to affirm that their everyday life at school suffered close containment and hardly any disapproval could be voiced, then the alacrity around the flip-board indicated the relevance of this improvised conversation among them launching, as it were, a *school agora*. As we can note belowin two photographed pages of the flip-board, there is a lot of vigor in the writing, almost edging chaos, a most colorful and disorderly style in which letters and lines criss-cross, a communicative format in terms of a huge "collective telegraph" where students felt free to disrupt our expectations and demands in order to search for a more meaningful response to the anniversary festivities.

If we, as researchers, were disappointed concerning the superficiality and the stereotypy of students' expressions, or the fact that they evaded *our* demand of reflecting on the old school photos, we could realize - some time later on - that aflight linewas undertaken by students as an answer to our demand. Their production pointed to an arena of action where talk, choice and decision were possible: friendships and emotional ties among them.

FLIP-BOARD PAGE I   FLIP-BOARD PAGE II

To be at this school entailed submitting to norms over which students did not seem to have a say. Nonetheless, school was also a place to meet friends and come to know the world from the standpoint of children or youth, thereby a very different world from that taught in textbooks or by teachers. Leaving one's signature, email or message on the flip-board transformed it into a "talking paper", a "collective screen telegraph" whereby students were produced as interlocutors in affairs that they needed not be constrained by school staff. Whom they decided to be friends with, to love or dislike, to go out with and so on, circumscribed a jurisdiction of their own where they felt free to choose their course of action.

Although students were also invited to take photos of their actual school so that a parallel could be traced between their present preferences and the old school photos that they had just seen, curiously enough, most photos did not fulfill this requirement. Their shots were not about the school or what they did there, but of themselves and their preferred mates. Many youth were so crazy about registering their group of friends, not only once but with many shots, that again the research team wondered whether the students had missed the point of the demanded activity. In one occasion one research assistant was so upset that he told the students that they had already taken too many shots. Photos, as the activity proposed to make them think about the old and the present school, was transformed into the quest and the result of a certain choice as to how be at school. This is illustrated by the title, given by youth themselves, to one of the photos

of the many kin groups photographed along this activity, which was 'the smartest friends of school'.

'The smartest friends of school'

In a certain way, as Rowlands (2005) has shown in his discussion of materiality, students could be materialized as presence, action and speech through the "talking paper" (flip-board) and the "lens which can see me and my friends" (photo activity). Both the flip-board and the photo activity revealed this "affect economy" of exchanging feelings and emotions as an outstanding undercurrent of school life which ran parallel to the strictures of order, discipline and everyday routines. Students imagined that containment had been released for a while - as they were in an atypical situation of festivity being invited by *strangers* (the research team) to show their minds about the school anniversary. Consequently, their massive and vigorous presence was outpoured before us, to the extent of arousing even in the research team containment reactions, for instance, those of restricting the use of the camera, or those attempting to set rules to the use of the flip-board. Containment reactions on the part of the research team indicated how it was inadvertently captured by, and led to act it out, the very same principle regulating the institutional dynamics despite its conscious efforts to make students free to talk and act. Children in this school understood their position as one of compliance to school norms which were meant to keep events under control as the only way for the school to function well. It was generally held that only by making youth do and act in accordance with adults' guidance, educational goals could be attained. The reverse of containment - disruption - seemed the way to get through the strictly controlled routines giving form to feelings and emotions that seemed to exist apart from the official reality of school

life. However, youth seemed to be pointing out that much more is at stake in school life than what is important to adults and known to them.

In search of autonomy: tensions and contradictions stemming from the school imaginary

Tensions are likely to arise in situations where control and containment are imagined to be effective to get things going, as emergent needs for new starts and ways of living tend to be obfuscated by known practices and routines. In this school a big source of tension remained the demand that the school should preserve its tradition of distinctiveness for which no efforts should be spared.

The *distinctiveness of school that ennobles also enslaves* enrolling students and teachers in a double-bind irrevocable process. For students, to study there was a safeguard to a good education leading to a good job, something to be valued due to the fact that state education in Brazil is in general disastrous and fails to provide students with minimum literacy. However, we could listen to many complaints coming from students regarding the high demands that the school posed to them. The students complained that they had no time for their own, that school hours were too long and coming to school on Saturday morning, at our invitation, for a video or music workshop was really too much. Contradictorily enough, these were the same reasons that made them praise the school and choose it as a superior institution with regards to others. We interpreted students' disapproval of being 'too much at school' as a way of expressing a veiled dissatisfaction towards school. It seemed that too much was being demanded from them, more than they could deal with, and that school expectations were indeed too high. It seemed that to be a student entailed such a high cost as to suggest the latent question: is it worthwhile? The affirmation that they were overcharged by school duties and at the same time, that it was lucky of them to study there, despite sounding contradictory, can be understood as an expression of a latent conflict which they did not dare to speak out. Was it worthwhile spending so much of their life to fulfill school's expectations?

The feeling of being overcharged did not belong to students alone. In a different way, teachers also complained that they were overcharged by school's responsibilities. The vice-head who was our key person at school very often complained to us of about her health problems. She was not alone: many teachers were on health license every now and then. The complaint that school red tape had increased immensely in the last years was pervasive. The state government had started a whole programme of in-service teacher evaluation which promised increasing a trifle in the meager salary of teachers. Productivity ranking was on the way. This situation also deflected teachers away from any overt expression of dissatisfaction. At one of the teachers' Saturday workshops where they received training for the state exams recently established it could be noted how teachers showed no questioning about the relevance, the timing or the adequacy of all those

educational rules and requirements demanded from students and from themselves. It was surprising to see that no demands, questions or, even, comments were made. It seemed that for teachers the imposed reality of norms and demands from higher educational authorities was irrevocable.

The distinctiveness of the school that ennobles also enslaves was based on a major achievement of this school which was to have founded the very first teachers' college of the municipality, established now for fifty years, and having formed most teachers of town. Teachers' training has been a professional course at secondary level education in Brazil so that young people who go for it can have a profession as they leave school at eighteen years of age. The teachers' college was a hallmark of this school by which it had become well known and famous. Many students praised the school for providing them with the opportunity of being professionalized as they left secondary education. Others affirmed that it was their parents' wish that they went to this school on account that a good secondary education came first even if it was the case of being a professional course, like in this school. The teachers' college stood, thus, as the prime and most cared for endeavour of this school. However, it also stood as an outstanding achievement of a past that seemed to arouse interrogations and suspicion in face of emergent demands of the present. Firstly, students complained that the training they received to become teachers was hardly compatible with the educational syllabus required to sit for exams at universities, so that if they wanted to go to a university they had to take up extra classes. There were many students that, though acknowledging the quality of the school, confessed to us that they did not want to be teachers. Others sullenly declared that they were there because they had been obliged to do so by their parents. Non-professional secondary education was also offered at this school but it had an inferior status taking place in the evenings for those youth who had to work during the day. Students, and even teachers, referred to the students of the non-professional secondary education course as the *forgotten ones* as their educational demands did not stand as a priority as compared to the teachers' training course.

'Being part of the family', particularly the 'selected family' of the students who were enrolled in the teachers' training course, meant securing a good professional training, and eventually a job, a supposedly enviable position for lower class youth. Contradictorily enough, many youth did not want to be teachers, and many were frustrated to waste their time being trained as teachers when they envisaged other professional prospects for them. As a matter of fact, the teaching profession in Brazil has gradually attracted less and less youth, due to its lack of social prestige, good working conditions and a reasonable salary. These conflicts remained part of the students' culture, and not even once did we hear staff's concerns about this kind of students' dissatisfaction. To put into question the teachers' training course and its actual status

proved to be a disapproving subject. This should be kept in silence by the permanent effort to safeguard the past of this school which had outdone other institutions by the good educational quality ofits teachers' college and the hallmark of its distinctiveness.

Final considerations

As we discussed the notion of autonomy, we pointed at the centrality of the on-going instituting process of reinventing the social pacts by which we abide. However, questioning the normative basis which conforms and secures our bonds to an established reality is sometimes difficult: as one changes a situation, one risks to lose one's cherished beliefs and stable ground. In the school where we worked autonomous action - a tenet whereby the arbitrariness of the *nomosi*s questioned - tended to be hindered by the need to preserve and safeguard the position of the school and the type of bond between it and teachers and students alike. The maintenance of the school imaginary with respect to the superiority of this school counteracted possible insurgencies and dissatisfaction which would question the status quo. As we noted, this did not mean that conflicts were not observed and frustrations did not take place. However, they took place as disruptions whose effects on changing school routines were hardly observed. Notwithstanding their vigour, they stood apart from central concerns and practices of teachers as an arena of school life which belonged to students' alone. The affect economy of students' life in school seems to stand as the sole arena where students can exert a certain degree of choice. However, one wonders whether, being left to themselves, they can also handle satisfactorily their own concernsand disputes over these matters.

The social imaginary of distinctiveness of the school constitutes a source of tensions and conflicts. These are deflected away from being overtly and explicitly expressed, thereby restricting their potentiality to start off changes.

What seems remarkable in this one year's long research intervention at this school is that the search for autonomy cannot be conceived as an individualized project (see for instance the discussion by Castoriadis, 1997). It does not seem to be possible that the individual on his own can attain autonomy despite the condition of heteronomy of the collective where he belongs. As we think of the normative basis of social relationships, the possibility to discuss and reinvent rules stands as a social process where interdependence becomes paramount. Autonomy seems to point to the struggles and strife of collectives to take part in the ever unending process of claiming and demanding their views to be included in the definition of what constitutes their everyday realities. In the case of our students it seems that questioning the *nomos* remained an individualized behaviour most of the time. But, as they were given the opportunity to express their regards concerning the 50th anniversary of the school, they were able to improvise a collective communication and a massive presence affirming, through their negativity, that

the past of the school needed to be questioned. By disregarding the past, materialized by the old photos, and bypassing our instructions to bring them to the fore, the students seemed to affirm the emergent needs of the present which seem too pressing to be disregarded or put aside despite the fact that they seem a menace to the instituted and cherished reality of the school.

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