

TENSIONS AND CONTRADICTIONS OF THE PRACTICE OF TEACHERS OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION IN URUGUAY IN THE NARRATIVES OF TEACHERS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF LATE MODERNITY

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Abstract: *Although sports and healthy physical activities seem to gain an increasing relevance as massive world-wide spectacles or as a daily basis self-construction of the individual body, Physical Education is losing weight in the curricula all around the world. This paradox affects Physical Education teachers who seem to share the devaluation of their own discipline in the benefit of the intellectual ones, such as Mathematics or Sciences, with obvious consequences on the future of modern populations in living a good and long life. The research addresses the question of how this phenomenon happens, through the record and a hermeneutical analysis of interviews with 23 physical education teachers about their own lives and careers, paying attention at the main milestones that marked their labour biographies. The analysis shows personal discomfort and anguish, not only as a result of functional overload and instrumental abuse (Weis) but due to the tensions that result of the anchoring of the professional field to three contradictory logics: the rational that governs work, the expressivity of ludic activities, and the value-oriented teaching profession (Weber, Habermas). At the long run, teachers resolve those tensions through a valuative hierarchy that orientate their professional elections, situating corporal activities in the very bottom of relevance, to the point of not teaching them, reproducing the structural devaluation of the discipline (Giddens, Archer). Theoretically, the research is framed into sociological theory of late modernity (Habermas, Giddens, Archer), and some classic theories of Sociology of Sports and Physical Education (Huizinga, Callois, Weis, Turner, Brinkhoff)*

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1. Introduction

According to Weber's classic statement (1944), Western modernity is the result of a vast process of rationalization that slowly, but relentlessly, infiltrates all the tissues of the social fabric. The spaces of rational decision are extended and reach more and more social areas, displacing religion and tradition as sources of interpretation and regulation of people's relationships with the world, with others and with themselves. The truth, morality and beauty, once eroded its only religious foundation, conform spheres of validity subject to different logics and rationalities: scientific, normative and aesthetic-expressive. The late modernity frames these logics in reflexive processes of agency and structuring mediated by the internal conversation of the subjects, at the service of projects of the self (Giddens, 1995; Archer, 2003). This work aims to show that, as a profession, physical education is simultaneously linked both to the world of instrumental rationality -of technical rules, calculation and strategy- typical of work⁸; and on the other, the expressiveness -proper of the leisure and of

⁸ « Bywork or rational action with respect to ends, I understand either instrumental action or rational choice, or a combination of both. The instrumental action is guided by technical rules that rest on empirical knowledge.) The

the ludic-. The teaching component of the profession -which tends to be associated with vocation- subjects the profession to value-based rationality, governed by moral values and non-tradable principles⁹. The instrumentality, the expressiveness, and the subjection to values, form the guiding and contradictory vertices of the teaching of Physical Education. The tensions generated by these contradictions are narrated by 23 professors retrospectively, through open interviews, showing the criteria that have guided their actions in the service of their own life projects.

2. Anchors and tensions of Physical Education

If these different logics actually work as the vertices of a field of forces that create tensions and dilemmas in teachers of Physical Education, we should find footprints of characteristic ways of reflexion, preferences or resignations, into their discourses. In this chapter the three logics are depicted and showed using some examples of textual sayings of the teachers.

2.1. Vocation

The vocational aspects have a huge weight. They emerge as soon as the conversation begins and gravitate in the story, giving meaning to the different milestones of the subjects' trajectory, illuminating not only their professional career, but their whole life. For some, there is a true *call*, a *revelation* that evokes the primitive meaning of the word, the vocation as a divine call. The subject feels that he has a *mission*, a *destiny* that he must and wants to fulfill, and any obstacle can be removed by the vocation and the disinterested service.

The vocation is also awakened in stages. From childhood until the beginning of the university, it is directed towards sports and movement. On admission to the university, he moves to the teaching, favoured by the low curricular weight of physical exercise: "I had many disappointments, (...) you arrive at the entrance, after months of physical preparation, and in the Institute, they quieten you. For a long time, there is no physical activity(E1)." The entrance to the school seems to act as a catalyst: students enter motivated by physical and sports activities, and they graduate devaluing them: "When you start the career, as you really like sports you see everything there. Then you discover education (...) physical activities as a means to educate, I do not understand them as an education of the body"; "the career, it is life itself, to awaken everything that the human being has inside (...) Life is pure didactic"; "The vocation of service I was born to serve (...) I feel like a born educator (...) it helps me to survive, to find the sun".

More than valuing the vocation, the false opposition between it and the specific technical contents of the profession is interesting: "the first thing is the human being and then the technical part". It is important (...) the affective, emotional. (...) The feeling is important. Transmit strong experiences, (...) beyond the technical." The vocational load conspires against the economic aspirations of paid work. When the logic of teacher delivery comes into tension with the work, the privilege of the vocational is perceived: "it gives me pleasure, I love it, economically it is not good, I live with my family without being able to become independent"; "I give a lot, I do activities that do not even demand me, I work more than what they pay me, (...) in both jobs this happens to me"

behavior of rational choice is oriented according to strategies based on analytical knowledge. » Habermas, 1989 :68

⁹ « the normative rationality of an action is measured by the systematizing and unifying force and by the penetration capacity of the value patterns and the principles that underlie action preferences. » Habermas, 1987, I, 233

2.2 Game

In the classic definition of Huizinga, (1984:44) "... the game is a free action or occupation, which develops within certain temporal and spatial limits, according to absolutely obligatory rules, although freely accepted, action that has its end in itself and is accompanied by a feeling of tension and joy and the awareness of *being otherwise* than in ordinary life." Here are gathered some of the most typical features of the ludic activity: freedom, temporal and spatial delimitation, regulation, tension and emotionality, and the fact of being an end in itself, where the emphasis, for our purposes, should be placed on freedom and in the fact of being a finality itself. "You cannot force a player to participate without the game ceasing immediately what it is," says Caillois (1979:37) and Huizinga emphasizes that "Every game is, first of all, a free activity. A game by mandate is not a game, at most a replica, (...) of a game (...) it is free, it is freedom" (1984:19-20).

In fact, the game never lacks in the speeches, but it does as the pedagogical means par excellence. When it is perceived as a means, when it is instrumentalized, the game is degraded and routinized. As Baudrillard says (1993:150): "We have already known the degradation of the game to the rank of function - the functional degradation of the game: the game-therapy, the game-learning, the game-catharsis, the game-creativity. (...) the old dominant pedagogy (...) is to give a meaning to the game, to assign an end, and consequently to purge it of its own seductive force (...) Exactly the reverse of that passion of the illusion that it characterized it." The arduous work of face (Goffman, 1970) that demands the functionalized game and the erosion of the limits between work and play, is well expressed by Riesman (1964:255): "our cultural definitions, introduce a lot of "game" endeavoured in the work (...) and a lot of "work" of adaptation to the group in the game."

Instrumented, functionalized, routinized -and perhaps with features of the super-seriousness that Huizinga diagnosed- the game becomes part of the discourse that more and more social actors construct about themselves and their activity. This is very noticeable in the case of Physical Education teachers. The game appears strongly instrumentalized in favour of other purposes, that can only help to take away its typical disinterest, its freedom and its full capacity for fun. "We have a tool of power, in the game, the recreational, rationalize it, constrain it" says a professor. To the extent that it is framed in a teaching setting and becomes a pedagogical technique for the transmission of knowledge or values, the game becomes inescapable for the student, who has no chance of choosing or deciding with freedom if you want to participate in the game or not, or if you want to play in this game, but not in the next one. And these, above all, when the promoter of the activity is a teacher or simply, for the children, an adult to obey.

If the boundaries between work and play are erased, there is no more play. The work can be creative, at times fun, stimulating and enriching. To connote it in this way is not necessary to call it a game, simply because it is work. We can say that a certain type of work is so pleasing that it seems like a game; but it is not a game. It is not disinterested, it is not free, and it is, for teachers and students, more than anything else, everyday life.

2.3 Work.

Although the professors had not been questioned about the place that the game and the vocation occupy in the context of their professional performance, -which also made their mention in a highly significant fact- the professors were asked in an express way about the labour aspects of their profession. Teachers were asked to make a biographical narrative of their work trajectory, of their beginning as students, of their graduation, of the work they had achieved and abandoned, pondering the reasons that led them to make such decisions up to the present time, and that they evaluate their work situation according to the satisfaction

achieved. If they were relevant to the actors, the mention of vocation and play would emerge, on their own, in their narration.

The game, the playful, which was a subject so frequented in the discourses on the conception of physical education and on the teaching activity, does not appear mentioned even once when it comes to talking about one's work. It seems that one thing is to talk in general about the objectives of physical education and about teaching practice, and quite another to talk about their own work, their working conditions and their pay. Here there is no place for the game, although there is a lot -and much- for the vocation and class delivery. The game is play and work is work. In the last case, if there is a game, those who play are the others: the students, the associates, the children and the young people, although, as it was seen, rarely as freely and voluntarily as the playful activity would require.

On the strictly labour situation, it was possible to detect the recurrence of four thematic nuclei: economic rewards, material working conditions -in general unsatisfactory in public schools-, the normative framework -which ranges from anomie to more routine rigidity, and the degree and sources of satisfaction-dissatisfaction. All these aspects will not be developed here; just one of them will be addressed.

Economic rewards, usually seen as salary, constitute, for most teachers, the darkest aspect of their activity, which, however, can be compensated by brighter aspects: The inherent satisfaction of the task and the realization of the vocation, they are enough to ignore the relative material deprivation to which the teaching work obliges. But high salaries are also "the dark side of the profession" for those satisfied. The connection between teaching vocation and economic hardship leads to the conviction that a good salary can impede the option in favour of more rewarding and meaningful activities. The glass will always be half empty: If the vocation is carried out, good remunerations are renounced; If you access these, you lose your freedom and taste for what you do. For one of the teachers, the activity for which he does not charge, is the closest to the profession, while being a director of a sports institution, which is also part of his profession and is very well paid, did not satisfy him.

3. The relief of tension: hierarchy and self-devaluation

It has been seen that the three opposing logics -the rational value of the vocational approach to teaching, the expressive linked to play and recreation, and the instrumental linked to the world of work- coexist in narratives almost always in a contradictory way. This tension must be resolved in some way and the resolution occurs by hierarchy: In the face of a contradiction, the most valuable redeems and justifies the least valued. This order, which gives meaning to the narratives of the subjects, constitutes a collective phenomenon, of a sociocultural nature, which defines the perceptive and evaluative horizon of those who practice the profession. The gradation is not named, but it exists; and we can say that it exists, because it is used.

The first place of importance, ordering and giving meaning to the professional practice and to life itself, is the vocation for teaching and secondarily for the physical or sporting. Being a teacher and being vocational go hand in hand, as the expressions *service vocation*, *destiny*, *transcendence* clearly show. This ends up diluting the specificity of the discipline, since physical education defines for itself the same objectives as general education: transmit moral values or even disciplines like Geography or Mathematics.

Immediately below, the vocational-teacher is situated, on the one hand, the ludic, on the other, the work. Both constitute *means* for more valuable purposes: the game is a pedagogical instrument for teaching; Work is a means of life at the service of vocational fulfilment. Thus, each of them is related to one of the elements that made up the pair teaching-vocation: work, with the vocational; the game, with the pedagogical and didactic. However, tensions become more than evident here. The relationship between the playful and

the pedagogical -which is for the teachers a middle-end relationship- runs parallel to another relationship, but this time of opposition between the spontaneity of the game and the discipline of learning. Teaching a discipline, whether sporting or not, is, first of all, teaching discipline. Within the curriculum, the game becomes an obligation, because as every child knows, the “invitation” of a teacher can rarely be rejected, has a start and end time, and is subject to evaluation and school qualification, that is, it is routinized. With this, it ceases to be a game. Perhaps, the devaluation of the ludic is, in the eyes of teachers, the only way to legitimize it within the school environment, because the game is not “serious”. The pleasure and the game, although legitimized by the new hedonism (Lash, Lipovetsky), require redemption, either by a previous workday and then fun is allowed; or by pedagogical purposes, and then it is distorted. The game and the vocation, are both expressions of the *extra daily* and function as legitimators of the superiority of a Physical Education far from the corporal, competitive sports, performance, and fitness.

Within this hierarchy, the labour can be placed in the same rank as the game. Unlike the latter, work is usually a factor of dissatisfaction. Its value is that of being a “means” - means of life- and of realization of the vocation. Another polarization, also opposed and parallel to the relationship work-vocation was found, between the everyday and the extra-daily, where the second justifies and redeems the first: At the service of vocation, work is valued, even if it does not serve as half of life and possibly because of it. If the income is good, the vocation loses importance. The game is also antinomic with work, although there is no transaction here: a job that is played is not real work.

Finally, the lower step is occupied by the specifically physical-sports, which is never mentioned positively by teachers. When talking about body work, it is always done in derogatory terms: only, merely. It is like if being a Physical Education Teacher was a simple credential requirement to aspire to different and higher objectives, where the corporal and motor achievements were by-products of a professional practice that aspires to the same level of social recognition that teachers themselves put in other disciplines.

4. Conclusions

The functional overload and the tensions that characterizes the professional field of Physical Education show an unfavourable panorama for the teachers: they oblige to perceive their own daily practice as a simple means for purposes that are not their own which generate insecurities and frustrations due to the inability to reach such high goals: “I feel as if I have taken a pastry course and only take advantage of it to make fried cakes (...) I need another level; I am in personal crisis with the activity”, a teacher says. Above all, these goals and tensions lead to forget or neglect their specific physical education teaching obligations, when in fact, socializing children in the correct way of displaying physical activity and the joy of it, would be more ambitious and fulfilling goals for most of the population. In Brinkhoff words: “The adoption of an active lifestyle is one of the major long-term aims of Physical Education. Active lifestyle (...) [sport], fitness activities and other behaviours related to body concept can all be seen as important elements (...) of lifestyles” (Brinkhoff, 1998:78-80), and a privileged way in reflexive construction of the self.

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