

Families, Schools and the Image Communication in the Education Market

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In this paper we intend to discuss the growing importance of communication as a tool for strategic management of educational institutions, including the communication between schools and parents. Claiming transformational leadership and effective communication system as essential to the success of educational institutions, *management* turns image communication into a key task, alongside the traditional management of human, financial and resources assets. In Portugal, this task seems hesitantly assumed by the school administration, but in other countries it is already the subject of an advanced theoretical approach. Actually, if many of the factors that influence the recruitment of students are outside the control of schools, the way schools are perceived by families is something that can be managed by them. Collected as part of a doctoral research project, the empirical data supporting this article are the result of observation of everyday life of a group of schools and from the testimonies collected over three years in that setting. In Portugal, it seems to point to the centrality of communication processes in the transformation induced by the new public management on behalf of a 'quality school', regardless its exact meaning to the different social actors, including students and their families.

Keywords: Image communication, home-school relationships, educational market, school management, new public management.

Introduction

The strengthening and diversification of investment in communication by educational institutions - including the communication between schools and families - are discussed in this paper as an effect of the new public management (Fulton, 2003; Pollit, 2003; Santiago, Magalhães & Carvalho, 2005). Regarding the 'quality' and 'effectiveness' of their performance, schools have sought to become more dialoguing, assuming the commitment to organizational communication as part of an entrepreneurial strategy shaping a new unified collective identity under a neoliberal policy agenda (Reed, 2002; Lipman, 2011).

From a case study conducted in a group of Portuguese schools, we intend to reflect upon how, in the face of new political and educational contexts, communication procedures play a key role in the reconstruction of the collective identity of an educational institution, and especially in the consolidation of a social image, particularly amongst families.

The empirical data point to a twofold situation: in the one hand, the centrality of communication processes in the transformation induced by the new public management and, in the other, the development of a bilingual discursive matrix, which seeks to harmonize the requirements of the 'market' with the pedagogical discourse and with bureaucratic-professional models of organization (Faria, 2012a).

Once the context of interaction is structured by communication, organizational communication becomes a central device of organizational dynamics, promoting the negotiation of meanings. Therefore, the internal processes of communication are key elements for the reception, interpretation and formulation of responses to educational policy. As such, communication not only ensures the mediation between the various actors interacting in the educational field, but also ensures the mediation between the pressures for change and the existing collective identity. Not less important, communication emerges as a 'manageable' field in whose structuring could be used as management tools capable of promoting a unified collective identity. These tools can thus be used by the leadership to promote the social prestige

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of the institution and to legitimize it internally and externally, namely amidst families and their communities.

The argument, based on the assumptions of the school of human relations, is that efficient communication processes provide the necessary information and understanding for everyone to fulfil their tasks in an efficient and motivated way. Thus, hierarchies try to strengthen, through communication, the involvement, participation and cooperation between teachers, non-teaching staff and students. Moreover, they strive to bring into school the families and other institutions with which school relates, promoting a corporate environment. In this logic, they endeavour to consult the involved groups, trying to meet their needs and also to disclose practices and results, inducing a favourable image among their 'publics' (Faria, 2012b).

Consumer-citizen and choice in education

Concepts such as consumer, customer or manager arise in several studies connoted with the liberal ideology that attempts to transform the field of education into a market in which schools compete with each other in the quest for bigger and 'better' share of customers, developing true marketing campaigns.

The dangers of marketing have been reported by several authors (Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe, 1995; Woods, Bagley & Glatter 1998; Burch, 2009), who highlight suspicions about the schools' hierarchy, their bipolarisation, their 'natural' selection and the progressive standardization of educational provision. The phantom of the privatization of the education provision, along with the problem of the maintenance and reinforcement of social and cultural inequalities, also appears as a threat, since, ultimately, the 'best' schools would be those who would benefit from more resources and that could choose their customers.

However, not only the connection between privatization and competition is debatable, since it is possible to introduce competition in the public sector with no transfer of property (Roger Dale, in Silva, 2003), as we cannot consider consumers as a homogeneous and uniform category. Any attempt to determine the factors that lead parents to choose certain schools over others seems, therefore, fruitless, pointing, instead, to talk about a composite of criteria (Faria, 2007).

In this regard, Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe (1995) concluded that the effectiveness of a school, reflected in the grade point average obtained by the students in national examinations, takes a small weight in the complex parental choices, in which communication and marketing strategies developed by schools play a non-negligible role. Thus, in the face of the cleavages (in terms of social class, ethnicity and gender) found by these researchers on the criteria of choice by parents, they constructed three ideal types of parents: the privileged/skilled chooser, the semi-skilled chooser, the disconnected chooser.

From this typology emerges that:

"The information that we have about the world of education, in general, the various schools subject to a potential choice, in particular, as well as the interpretation we make from the various signals emitted by those, varies greatly depending on the cultural capital and habits of each family". (Silva, 2003:31)

That is, we cannot consider the decision process as linear and rational as both advocates and critics of liberal ideology tend to assume.

A similar observation is made by Philip Woods (1998). By introducing the concept of consumer-citizen in this problem, the author argues that the perspective with which we have looked at the issue of parents as consumers corresponds to a narrow view since the consumer has not been looked upon as being a member of a political community but rather as a passive being. The concept of consumer-citizen, which is not new but poorly explored, gives account of the various collective activities of citizens and, consequently, the various identities (hybrid and fragmented), typical of post-modernity, are present in the process of parental school choice through the different affiliations and rationalities mobilized.

Communication as a tool for image management

As a management tool, communication can be defined as the process by which the hierarchies ensure the involvement, participation and performance of different actors that comprise an institution or are related to it. In this sense, communication would provide the information and understanding necessary for everyone to

carry out their duties in line with school policy, while it also would provide the motivation and cooperation necessary for the appropriation of new educational policies. These two purposes together would promote an environment favourable to the development of a corporate spirit, a good performance and, consequently, to the satisfaction of the different audiences.

In this perspective, which translates managerial reasoning invoking transformational leadership and effective communication system as essential to the success of an organization, image management has been assumed as a major task to 'new school managers' alongside the traditional management of human, financial and asset resources. In Portugal, this function seems shyly assumed by the school administration, but in other countries it is already the subject of advanced theoretical approach (Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe, 1995; Ballion, 1992; Woods, 1986). In England, where the 'marketing of education' seems to have become a reality as a result of the economic autonomy of schools instilled by the reforms of 1988 and 1993, the relationship between the image of the school and its viability has become quite clear, according to the reports of the headmaster interviewed by the authors:

"The amount of money you get for the school depends on the number of pupils you have, so therefore if you want money for the school, you've got to get more pupils, and you can only get them at the expense of other schools, so we will have to compete more with other schools, we have to advertise, we have to put ourselves about, we have to make sure everyone knows what a good school Milton is. (...) Instead of being happy about it, we have to tell everyone now, we will have to go out and make sure that we recruit sufficient kids to enable the school to continue on its present sort of level".
(Chair of governors, Milton School in Gewirtz et al, 1995:124)

Indeed, many of the factors that influence the recruitment of students, including population growth and socioeconomic characteristics of the catchment area of a school, are outside the control of the institution, while the image is something that can be managed by it. As argued

by Gewirtz and her colleagues (1995), this new approach represents a huge cultural transformation in the educational field, with implications on the amount of energy, attention and resources allocated to other aspects of education and on the nature of the relationships established between teachers and parents, between teachers and students, between management bodies and the other members of the school organization and between different levels of education.

Emphasizing the symbolic schools production in this market, these authors use the semiotic analysis to reach the new social imaginary of schools and understand the consequences of this change. Stressing that the production of an image cannot neither be separated from the substantive practices of a school, nor be confused with mere promotional activity, the authors show that, with differing degrees of intentionality, schools always produced images about themselves, conveying them through the practices and policies of the school, through the architecture of the space, and the style of management and leadership. The authors also demonstrate that some parents have always been particularly aware of these messages:

"Power (1994) has pointed out that: 'The education market is not the result of recent policy, but stems from the long-standing relationship between education and a stratified social structure'. Certainly many middle-class parents have always effectively acted as consumers of education, schools, have always competed for their custom and local school systems have always been organized hierarchically, reflecting and reinforcing social stratification more general".
(Gewirtz et al, 1995: 123)

Simply, the financial consequences of recruitment policies are currently more immediate. The institutional autonomy of schools makes today, regardless their position in the 'market', educational institutions feel the need to become more attractive to 'consumers', and, therefore, be more reflective about the messages they send abroad, creating a more attractive image for parents in general, and for some parents, in particular, being notorious the effort of school

managers for monitoring the process of semiotic production.

Among the activities related to image management concerning the English case, Gewirtzet *al* (1995: 126-137) stress:

- The reshape of buildings and decoration of spaces;
- The production of advertising materials, including pamphlets and prospectus;
- Communication with the media, using invitations and press releases;
- A range of public events, in which the visual impact (using uniforms and logos) and speeches tend to become more professional according to a corporate image;
- The search for harmony between the different levels of education, by standardizing the speeches.

According to these authors, such investment may be of little significance for each school, but if we look at the overall investment we found huge amounts of money and time spent on promotional activities. On the other hand, although they recognize that all this can result in strengthening the self-esteem of all those who share the school, creating a more pleasant environment for the teaching/learning process, the authors warn against the risk of manipulation of the collective imaginary by the school administration and/or their formalization and depersonalisation, that can result in the loss of sense of community. Thus, they demonstrate how disseminated messages are being standardized and simplified, making it liable to understandings that serve different positions. In the messages produced the coexistence of terms such as traditional / modern, conservative / progressive, disciplinary / protective, reveals that bilingualism, enunciated by Clarke and Newman (1997) and invoked by Gewirtzet *al* (1995:98), is well present in the analysed schools allowing the reconciliation of the pedagogical discourse with a discourse increasingly oriented to the 'market'.

A content analysis of brochures and documents produced by the various schools studied by this team of researchers also showed that the traditionally informative style seems to have given way to a purely promotional one, showing that schools seem more concerned with attracting parents than in informing them. While these two dimensions need not necessarily to be exclusive, as the authors point out, it is not difficult to realize that there are aspects related to the 'quality' of a school that cannot be

perceived in a short visit. Likewise, a brochure or a promotional event features an idealized image of the school, which hardly corresponds to what is happening in it (1995:135). It does not mean that schools are becoming dishonest, but that a certain manipulation of the truth is inevitable, in the sense of what Jean Baudrillard (1991) refers as an 'aesthetic hallucination of reality', with possible implications for the integrity of the relationship between schools and parents, or even children.

Although, in Portugal, competition among schools is mitigated by the fact that public sector ensure 84% of educational provision¹ and because the recruitment of students results essentially from geographical catchment², is clear the attempt to institutionalize a 'market ecology' in public organizations, in general, and in education, in particular, as a way to promote social efficiency. In this regard, Vieira (2003) wonders about the impact of competitive pressures resulting from increasing competition for academic titles on the Portuguese education system. The conclusions reached by the author, fully supported by the work of Silva (1999), Lopes (1997) and Afonso (1999), point to the representation of an educational space that, although formally open to all, seems susceptible to the strategies of the parents who are more familiar with the educational system and more actively engaged in ensuring the academic and social 'quality' of the school attended by their children (Vieira, 2007: 279)³. In this sense, the signs of an increasing attention regarding the self-presentation, appearance and image seem obvious, indicating deep changes in the management style.

The 'Campos do Liz' case: in search of a distinctive image

Naturally, there have always been schools especially attentive to the processes of communication, just like there have always been

¹Adapted from DGEEC, 2012 in Conselho Nacional de Educação, 2013: 69.

³The Order 14026/2007 of 3 July, which has allowed parents to enrol their children in any school, regardless of area of residence and of the place of parents' work, represents a liberalizing measure, with impact in the composition of the school population.

schools in which managers resembled to what is now defined as a transformational leader⁴. The '*Campos do Liz*' Group of Basic Education Schools⁵, where we conducted our fieldwork, seems to be such a case, since the testimonies we collected show its headmaster as someone who over 20 years has been characterized by her charisma, having invested a lot in communicating with all partners, in order to motivate and mobilize the entire educational community into an entrepreneurial logic.

The '*Campos do Liz*' is set in a village which is about 20 km from the nearest town. It serves a large and dispersed set of semi-rural villages. That is why it covers a wide area, but has a low population density. The '*Campos do Liz*' covers eight villages, and is an administrative unity, which integrates 13 kindergartens, 21 schools of 1st cycle of Basic Education⁶ and the headquarters school where we found 19 classes of 2nd and 3rd cycles of Basic Education⁷, with a total of 145 teachers, 74 non-teaching staff and 1677 students in 2006/07.

In this case the increase of communicative effort required by the new legislation⁸ seems to have been relatively small. For schools like these, the challenge, due to the increasing of entrepreneurial competencies, goes through integrating these practices in a global communication plan towards the managerial rhetoric and promoting the development of bilingualism enunciated by Clarke & Newman (1997).

Methodological framework

⁴Matching to managerial idea means an administration and leadership of schools closer to what the new management theories advocate for businesses. In this perspective, the leader is seen as a creator of energy (Fullan, 1992) that combines management skills with ethical values, trying to meet the challenges of change with a structural, cultural and systemic shift (Diogo, 2004). So, the project set for the organization turns out to be personified in an individual or small group that becomes places of identification for the remaining individuals in the organization.

⁵Fictitious name

⁶1st cycle of Basic Education: 1st through 4th grades.

⁷2nd cycle of Basic Education: 5th and 6th grades; 3rd cycle of Basic Education: 7th through 9th grades.

⁸The so called New Regime of Autonomy, Administration and Management of Schools

Having introduced the theoretical framework, it is time to present and discuss some of the empirical results of our study. These results were obtained through a case study focused on a group of basic education schools especially heterogeneous and dispersed, ensuring the existence of a variety of individual and collective experiences that allowed a set of inferences and conceptualizations obtained by the contrast between the regularities and specificities observed in the practice and in the speech of the actors. Moreover, it is important to say that the selection of this case did not result from its exemplarity but from its singularity. Previous research (Faria, 2007) pointed towards a coherent discourse in that educational community, whose foundations we wanted to understand. The possibility of communication constituting a management strategy towards the building of a collective identity, unified around the neo-liberal ideals of 'quality', 'excellence' and 'efficiency', was one of the starting points of this research.

Driven by the logic of discovery, we sought to gather information as detailed as possible about the development of the processes and content of communication in the group of schools. In this sense, we used diverse techniques of data collection and its constant triangulation, trying to take the most advantage of the intersection between the elements obtained by indirect observation and those that resulted from the direct observation of phenomena. Between September 2006 and March 2009 we used direct observation (disarmed and 'natural'), we carried out 32 interviews with students, teachers, representatives of parents and of the local authority, and we applied 258 questionnaires to parents, teachers and non-teaching staff. Throughout these three school years, we also collected a set of institutional documents of public nature, including those available online. Given the nature of the collected information, the treatment of the data involved descriptive statistical processes (typical of quantitative analysis) as well as interpretative and inductive processes, adapted to content analysis.

Experiences and speeches of the actors in the educational community

The communicational investment:

Analysing '*Campos do Liz*', we tried to know the perception that different actors had of the investment made in the field of communication, taking into account their different domains. The

data from the survey (Table 1) tell us that the vast majority of non-teaching staff is in favour of the existing communication (74%), a percentage that rises in the case of teachers (92%), with 89% considering that internal communication is a constant concern of the school administration,

while only 50% recognizes identical investment on external communication. Among families, evaluation keeps being positive, but the figures are less expressive, dropping to 58% of those who assess global communication as 'good' or 'very good'.

Table 1 -Perception of global investment in communication

	Parents	Non-teaching Staff	Teachers
Very Good	22%	20%	49%
Good	36%	54%	43%
Low	33%	18%	7%
Null	8%	7%	1%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Source: Sousa, 2010

It should be noted that, in the context of the interviews we conducted and of the open questions of the surveys, it seems clear that the representation about communication displayed by most actors is limited to devices for broadcasting information. It is understandable, therefore, that meetings, inter/intranet, informative scoreboards and informal contacts had been the most reported communication processes. Families also mentioned the role of the Class Director and the student school individual report

However, we tried to go further. To the extent we were interested in knowing the respondents' opinion about the effort of communication in the different domains, we constructed multiple item scales from a set of indirect questions. This has enabled a closer approach to the concept of communication, as it was conceived in this study, i.e., while a structuring element of change, since it organizes the context of interaction and provides mediation between actions and structure (Giddens, 1984). This notion led us to

distinguish the expressive dimension of communication - which accounts for the interaction, more or less spontaneous, among the actors who make up the institution or are related to it - from its instrumental dimension, which is close of the assumptions of new public management. On this basis, we examined the compared communication effort (Table 2). Starting with the non-teaching staff, we concluded that these actors recognize that this group of schools invests 'very much' or 'rather' in communication of belonging and in the promotion of auditing and control, but few recognize the investment in operational communication.

In the case of teachers, the values we reached proved to be fairly homogeneous, suggesting a balanced communicational effort. They essentially recognize the commitment to promote communication activities to encourage the participation of the educational community, but they also recognize the investment in the

Table 2 - Communicational effort compared

	Investment Valuation (According to the management invests actors 'very' or 'fairly')		
	Parents	Non teaching staff	Teachers
Index of Global Communications	58%	74%	92%
Operating System	73%	26%	33%
Belonging System	4%	37%	38%
Audit and control system	23%	37%	33%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Source: Sousa, 2010

transmission of the information for the operation of schools, the monitoring practices and consultation to the different elements of the educational community, as well.

Regarding families, it is especially mentioned the effort to transmit information on time. The actions of the educational community consultation are little recognized (23%), as well as those that encourage participation (4%). In

short, the assessment of communicational investment made by the social actors suggests that 'entrepreneurial' strategy is present in the overall architecture of communication system of the '*Campos do Liz*', even if their perception of the commitment about the different goals tends to be little consensual.

The assertion of a distinctive image: The concept of collective identity, stressing the importance of symbolic production on the collective imaginary, calls our attention to the fact that the identity of an organization, more than real, emerge as an instrument for external legitimating, as argued by new institutionalism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Zucker, 1983). This perspective leads us to reflect on the process of communication as bearer of an image that

schools want to convey externally, taking families as the main target of potential students.

When analysing '*Campos do Liz*', we were concerned in accessing its organizational image, departing from the perception that actors have of how it is seen by others. Thus, we sought indicators of notoriety, from the representations of the impact of school rankings and of other forms of evaluation of services, but also from representations of its 'competitive advantage' and possible threats to its image. In this sense we explicitly asked teachers and families to qualify the '*Campos do Liz*' image (Table 3). It was categorized as 'good' or 'very good' by 82% of teachers. In the case of families, the same trend is being kept, although less acutely: 51% of parents think that the school image is 'good' or 'very good', while 47% consider it 'fair'.

Table 3 - Perceived image about the Group of Schools

	Parents	Teachers
Very Good	5%	27%
Good	46%	55%
Fair	47%	9%
Bad	3%	9%

Source: Sousa, 2010

Regarding the '*Campos do Liz*' social prestige, it should be noted that the various projects in which it is involved contribute to its social recognition. Likewise, it should be noted the prevalence of a positive image between the local teaching communities, based on the environment found by teachers who have previously taught there. If this was something we had foreseen, we were able, during fieldwork, to acknowledge other factors that contribute to the strengthening of the social recognition outside this group of schools. Locally, we highlight the internships of students of Education and Training Programs in local companies, which have been opening doors to new forms of cooperation, as well as the use by local neighbourhoods of the school-headquarters' space and resources, particularly through the activities of Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competences (RVCC) and of Portuguese courses for foreigners. Since this is a well-equipped school, and the headmaster provides the resources to these projects, the community not only becomes acquainted to the school and with its administration, which is usually present in these events, as tends to form a favourable representation of their actions and behaviours. This previous familiarity may prove

to be a decisive factor when parents choose a school for their children.

In a wider sphere, we cannot help mentioning the importance of the various exchanges with schools from other countries that recurrently visit the '*Campos do Liz*', either by initiatives undertaken within their programs, either by other Portuguese schools which include a visit to the '*Campos do Liz*' Group of Schools in their routes, placing it in the circuit of European schools.

The promotion of favourable image arises then as an achieved institutional objective, even if this goal is not directly searched and/or recognized by the administration. Considering the ranking of schools as one of the factors that contributes to shaping the social image of a school, taken as an indicator of its 'quality', especially by the prominence given by the media, we tried to know to what extent the position of '*Campos do Liz*' was known by the local actors and the meaning given to it. We noted that only 32% of students knew what the ranking of schools was, but none of them could identify the position occupied by their school. In fact, more than a weighting factor when selecting a school, the ranking was assumed as an element of self-regulation or even as a motivating factor. In the case of parents,

only one identified the position of '*Campos do Liz*', interpreting it as merely «a sign that it is not one of the worst schools». Even among teachers, awareness of the school's position did not go beyond 27 %, which should result from the depreciation of this indicator among this professional group.

In the absence of information about the ranking of '*Campos do Liz*', we looked for the position occupied by the school-headquarters in the internet (Table 4), not because of its importance at the national level, but to be able to compare the relative position of the three neighbour private schools (schools X, Y and Z).

Table 4 - Ranking of surrounding schools

School/Year	2006	2007	2008	2009
College X	271	252	226	749
Campos do Lis	466	567	152	496
Colégio Y	585	583	632	812
Colégio Z	623	689	463	801

Source: '*Expresso*' Newspaper on-line

The fact is that 78% of teachers think that competition from the three neighbour private schools is felt 'very' or 'fairly' in the definition of educational strategies and ways of working at '*Campos do Liz*'. Likewise, either in the most formal moments, or during the interviews, the concern with the 'escape' of students to the surrounding schools was a constant. Now, analysing the period in which this research took place, the ranking of schools published by '*Expresso*' (a weekly national newspaper) revealed that, in 2006 and 2007, national examinations in Portuguese and Mathematics put School X in the top rankings of the surrounding schools, emerging School Z in the last place. Since 2008 there has been realignment of these positions, with '*Campos do Liz*' going to the first place and School Z to overtake School Y.

Regardless the value that we assign to these results, the truth is that they are opposite to the expectations and fears of the teaching staff. During the Pedagogical Council of July 2007, a Department Coordinator received the results of the National mathematics assessment of the 4th and 6th grades, asked everyone about the results of School Y (the nearest from school-headquarters) and stressed the importance of comparing the obtained results. Following this intervention, the headmaster stressed the need to publicize «the good things did at the '*Campos do Liz*'» and warned about the need to «move urgently ahead with a marketing plan». During that year, the school had missed a 7th grade class and in 2007/2008 would miss another two - one of the 5th grade and other of the 9th.

The competitive environment: The discussion released in this Pedagogic Council reflected the position of 89% of teachers who, in the survey, recognized that competition is a matter of

concern to '*Campos do Liz*'. Therefore, we wanted to assess the 'loyalty' of students and their families. We noticed that 21% of student class delegates had pondered the possibility of moving to another school and that 10% of families had planned to move their children to a private school before the end of mandatory schooling. In these cases, the reasons were mainly transportation and proximity from home (40%), as well as the fact that private schools accepted students beyond the 9th grade (15%) or the existence of older siblings over there (10%). 'Best conditions', 'hardworking teachers' or 'more control over students' were expressions of mere individual positions. As expected, the correlation between the intention of keeping children at '*Campos do Liz*' and the qualification attributed to its image or environment and the rate of global communication, always proved to be particularly low.

During interviews with teachers, the reduction of students in favour of the private schools was a recurring theme. However, what should be the true object of analysis is what happened to those students who, in the 1st cycle of Basic Education (1st through 4th grades), attended the '*Campos do Liz*' Group of Schools and left it when they enrolled in the 5th grade. Nevertheless, it was fewer and fewer the students who, belonging to '*Campos do Liz*', chose to move to private schools. The trend, according to some teachers, seemed to begin to reverse itself, which fitted the declared intentions revealed in the surveys. Although 86% of families had residence in villages outside the '*Campos do Liz*' catchment area, only 10% showed the intent to enrol their children in the nearest private school. Even if some of these intentions would not become achieved, the fact is that 4 out of the 19 interviewed students lived in villages within the

School X catchment area and chose to enrol at 'Campos do Liz'.

It seems that the task of constructing an image of social prestige began to produce outcomes, and that 'Campos do Liz' seemed to be able to project a 'marketable' image outside in response to the marketing strategies developed by the local private schools, as recurrently reported by teachers.

Although authors such as Maria Manuel Vieira (2007) reject the hypothesis of 'choice' in the Portuguese educational landscape, this is a pressing problem in the case of 'Campos do Liz', who, «sandwiched between three private schools», feels permanently threatened by the offer of private schools, in particular by their transportation system, which a public school cannot match:

"Outside is said that School X is a reference for ... Look, the facilities, the teachers, the requirements that students have in terms of lessons and rigour ... The transportation itself, which works in a perfect way or nearly! (...) After all, it is the stigma of public school! And now it is very fashionable this differentiation. It begins right there ... Even the fact that you see a school bus and an old lady seated next to a school kid ... One sees immediately that it is for everyone and not only for a few. While in the private school it doesn't. It comes a lady with a flag..."

(Parents' Association member)

On the other hand, it also emerged a component of tradition in this competitive process between public and private school. Two of these private schools were very old and maintained a privileged relationship with the local population at the level of kindergarten and 1st cycle of Basic Education. So, although schools that ensure these educational levels belong to 'Campos do Liz', they were often invited to participate in the initiatives of these private schools, developing, thus, hybrid identities.

Perhaps this challenge is the 'leitmotiv' of 'Campos do Liz', what makes it to continuously reinvent and surpass itself in order to address competition. Its identity seems to be constructed by reference to the private schools as the result of a constant game of approximation to the

'market' and of distancing of the nearest competitors. In this 'game', marketing is a largely used device, although it does not arise yet in the practice of 'Campos do Liz' in an integrated manner, as reported by the headmaster:

"We've talked about it many times, about trying to make here some 'marketing' (...) But this is a subject that is far to be a reality soon! At least, on a consolidated, planned, consistent basis... Since a long time ago we have realized that we had a huge competition here! And, of course, from the moment that we have a clearer idea of what the private schools do to take kids, of course, we react! (...). These common projects end up being an important issue, although not developed just on a 'marketing' perspective, no! These projects turned out to be a 'counter attack' ... (so to speak) to the 'marketing' of the private schools, but did not appear because of it!"(Headmaster)

In short, it is important to underline that, a few years ago 'Campos do Liz' had to deal with other threats concerning behavioural problems of students and high levels of school failure, which, eventually, spread a negative image. What we see now is that 'Campos do Liz' not only seems to have managed to control problems of drugs, indiscipline and insecurity that were felt there, as has also succeeded to improve the academic results of students and assert a set of distinctive features, which are now an attraction for students and their families: a differentiated training offer, good facilities and advanced computing equipment. But, in our opinion, none of this would have resulted if, through a strong investment on communication, the administration had not insisted in the construction of a distinctive social image, based on a unified collective identity, externally conveying the 'gestalt' of a dynamic Group of Basic Schools with an opened mind.

Conclusion

Given the central place that the concept of identity occupies in our research, we sought to characterize the collective identity of 'Campos do

Liz' as a construct that arises from the sense that actors attribute to their distinctive features. In this discussion, we emphasized that collective identity is both instrumental and expressive, and that it can act as an understanding platform, from which one can trigger real change and assert an image on the market of education, in general, and among parents, in particular.

The consistency of the process of attribution of meaning, which results in a unified view of the institution, has been favoured by communication procedures designed to manage subjectivities, guiding it for identification with a collective, structured around a set of ideas in which, supposedly, all actors have to recognize themselves. Being the locus of initiative, or of facilitation of these processes, on the formal leadership of an educational organization, its development seems to be a key component in the acceptance of the rhetoric and practice of change, linked to the legitimacy of the institution mission, its morphology and its power structure. While promoting the discursive consistency - about themselves and others - communication procedures are instituted as a mediating instance between educational objectives of managerial type, externally imposed - 'quality', 'excellence' and 'accountability' - and the distinctive features of the Group of Basic Schools. This is a game that attempts to merge a dual legitimacy of change: an internal one, in order to obtain the adherence of actors to build a unified organizational identity, and an external one, in order to get social recognition.

In the studied case, from the discourse of the actors, we found that '*Campos do Liz'* tended to be defined, internally and externally, by its humanism, by the investment in new technologies, by the dynamism and the capacity for innovation, although it is conditioned by a strong dispersion of the schools that comprise it. The almost unanimity recorded around these attributes, as well as the adjectives used by the headmaster when asked about the distinctive features of this Group of Basic Schools, is an example of consistency in the institution's attribution of meaning. Such consistency allowed us to postulate the existence of a collective identity that is unified around these ideals, even if subsisting different identities - different ways of seeing, being and feeling the '*Campos do Liz'*, which relate to their own history and morphology.

The argument presented here is that the management of image in the educational market comes from a way of dealing with subjectivities, in which communication processes play a vital role and the headmaster assumes an important role. This seems to confirm the idea that the progressive assimilation of the entrepreneurial ideal, influenced by the New Public Management, has been favourable to the development of a bilingualism that aims at harmonizing imperatives of 'market' with pedagogical discourse and the bureaucratic-professional model of organization. In this sense, we can say that in the management of its image, the administration has fulfilled its role of mediation of the relationship between the organization and the families, contributing to the redefinition of the mission of this Group of Basic Schools and of its rules, without letting such changes put into question its integrity.

The way the Group of Schools we studied assimilated the new guidelines, inscribes the occurring changes on a continuum, in which communication has strengthened its strategic centrality, approaching the scenario described by Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe (1995). Not only because the organizational ideal that underlies the new rules has remained, but mostly because it kept the leadership.

Throughout our research, we emphasized how the leadership of this Group of Schools is assumed as a locus of meaning production, making a favourable management to an entrepreneurial view of organization. But we have also stressed its peculiarities: the fact that the headmaster took the lead for over 15 years without any opposition in electoral acts, as well as the traces of her charismatic personality and her identification with the entrepreneurial ideal of organization. We are aware that in other Schools the adherence to the new management has been less peaceful, and the resistance to new public management has resulted in internal conflicts and ruptures that questioned the rightfulness of established leadership. In these cases, it seems to have emerged a crisis of legitimacy that is not dealt with in this research. However, we believe to be important to analyse those cases (which point to the mentioned crisis of legitimacy) within the framework of the discussion about the impact of new public management in the education field, in general, and within the framework of basic education, in particular.

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