

## A Reflection on Sociology of Education

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### Abstract

Following an evident scientific strength of Sociology of Education, especially in the macro-analysis of school phenomena and, in a second moment, in the analysis of school as an organisation, is it possible that, currently, there is a reduction in the centrality of the importance ascribed, at various levels, to this scientific area? This preliminary reflection, which is based on a perspective from Portugal, aims to put forward an insight about Sociology of Education, with all the risks that this kind of analysis entails. Conclusions point to the following relevant dimensions of Sociology of Education: its importance in the definition of several sociological paradigms, considering the (greater or lesser) relevance ascribed to the socialisation process; its specific contribution to the sociological understanding of educational phenomena in the training of future sociologists; and, also, its prospective contribution to the development of Educational Sciences, both in the understanding of educational phenomena in their broadest sense and in dialoguing and participating in discussions on the object of Educational Sciences themselves. So as to achieve this ambition, among other factors, it seems essential that Sociology of Education continues to deepen its knowledge about other educational dimensions beyond school and the phenomena directly connected to it, dialoguing, whenever heuristically relevant, with other scientific areas.

**Keywords:** sociology of education, school, education, socialisation, relevance, potentialities, educational sciences.

Is the modern promise of emancipation, through education, adverse (social, family, cultural...) background conditions and/or repair of pathways that were once irreversible, coupled with the belief in the adherence to education as a key tool to avoid the vulnerabilities and risks of an uncertain world, shaken today?

(Alves, Torres, Dionísio, & Abrantes, 2016a, pp. xxvii)

### 1. Introduction

Education, in its broadest sense, has been present as a classic key element since the establishment of Sociology as scientific discipline (Abrantes, 2011; Berthelot, 1990; Boarini, 2014; Haetch, 1994; Martins, 2012; Morrow & Torres, 1997; Queiroz, 2001; Sandoval, 2016), under different approaches. For example, “education as a space for ideological reproduction of the interests of the dominant class (Marx and Engels); as critical integrative institutions for social order (Durkheim); as a source of a new principle of control, as instrumental rationality or bureaucratic domination” (Morrow & Torres, 1997, p. 24).

In general, the acknowledgement and the academic, social and political status of education and sociology fields may not be very high compared to other scientific areas (Kasapoglu, 2016; Oliveira & Silva, 2016; Silva & Alves, 2015). Specifically on Sociology of Education (SE), there is, at times, some confusion between the conceptual definition of education, socialisation and schooling (Boarini, 2014; Vincent, Lahire, & Thin, 1994), which hampers clarity in the delimitation of SE’s object or objects.

There are also clear differences in the objects and, consequently, in the theories used in SE as science (Anfal, 2009; Beisiegel, 2013; Boarini, 2014; Haetch, 1994; Hart & Sriprakash, 2017; Loureiro, 2012; Oliveira & Silva, 2016; Popkewitz, 2013; Sandoval, 2016; Silva & Alves, 2015; Vasconcellos, 2003; Zago, 2015), where there may be a dimension of fragmentation that reinforces SE’s lower visibility, despite its relevance in the understanding of educational (school and non-school) phenomena.

Especially after World War II, with the valuing of School as institution and, later on, as organisation in the promotion of meritocracy and as a factor of economic development, school inequalities and the result of the processes of democratisation in the massification of school attendance by students in the context of schooling were valued as key objects of analysis in SE (Abrantes, 2011; An  al, 2009; Berthelot, 1990; Galarza, 2016; Gomes, 2014; Haetch, 1994; Leal, 2016; N  ova, 1995; Queiroz, 2001), given that the educational system integrates students into a common cultural background, but it also differentiates students, by classifying them (B ack, 2012, p. 665).

Thus, SE was, for a long time and not only in Portugal, basically the/a sociology of School and of the formal education processes. However, SE has never been only a sociology of School at the macro-social analysis level, even occurring an increase in study objects of the meso-social and micro-social type, whether directly related or not to school education (Almeida, 2016; Alves, Torres, Dion  io, & Abrantes, 2016b, An  al, 2009; Ferreira, 2006; Flecha, 2011; Loureiro, 2012, among others). In an up-to-date synthesis:

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, plurality and diversity characterise Sociology of Education in Portugal and in other countries. In terms of the topics and study objects, a very brief retrospective analysis allows identifying a significant interest in the analysis of educational policies that has accompanied the shifts introduced in the regulation of these policies; the existence of works in the area of multicultural and intercultural education, as well as in the field of gender inequalities and class social inequalities; and it is also possible to identify research on various issues, such as equality of opportunity, social equity or justice in education, and focusing on the different levels of education (from kindergarten to university) and the various ages of life (from childhood to old age) (Silva & Alves, 2015, p. 24).

At least in Portugal, teachers' training, the inclusion of SE in higher education curricula, and scientific research made it possible to legitimise SE, which gained momentum in the 1970s (for further development and deepening, see Afonso, 2005, 2009; Sebasti  o, 2017; Silva & Alves, 2015; Stoer, 2008).

However, after numerous successes, several researchers highlight the SE's progressive lack of visibility in the scientific arena, but mainly in the social and political one (Abrantes & Am  ndio, 2014; An  al, 2009; B ack, 2012; Lauder, Brown, & Halsey, 2009; Mendes, 2009). For example, in Portugal, SE is losing relevance in the educational curriculum of teachers' initial training, despite being one of the vital dimensions of its institutionalisation (Almeida, 2016).

In summary, Pedro Abrantes observed, in 2010, the need to deepen the reflection on SE, and considered, with pertinence, that

[...] sociology of education in Portugal faces, today, unprecedented scientific and professional challenges, such as the relative dependence on educational agendas, the media hegemony of a common-sense discourse on education, the recent restructuring and the drastic reduction in the search for teachers' training programmes, internationalisation requirements and the increasing competition for scientific funding, among others, at a time when it may still not have fully healed some of its classic wounds, in particular the stubborn focus on school, to the detriment of other educational forms and agents, and its ideological and descriptivist drifts, both caused by excess of voluntarism or even normativism, which have sometimes reduced it to a poor relative, whether of the sociological family, or of educational sciences (p. 11).

Notwithstanding several developments since then (see, for example, the proceedings of the Congresses of the Portuguese Sociological Association, available at <http://aps.pt/pt/atas-dos-congressos/>, as well as the proceedings of the Meetings of the Thematic Section of Sociology of Education of the Portuguese Sociological Association, available at <http://aps.pt/pt/atas-encontros-seccoes-tematicas/>, which address issues related to SE), this problem seems to us still current.

This preliminary reflection, which is based on a perspective from Portugal, aims to put forward an insight about what may be the relevance and potential of SE today and for the future of Sociology of Education, with all the risks that this kind of analysis entails.

## **2. Sociology of Education**

### *2.1 Sociology and Sociology of Education*

Sociology, as a scientific area or discipline, as a whole, has its own identity characteristics of scientific and teaching nature (Ferreira & Serpa, 2017). Specifically on the relationship between Sociology and SE, if SE has been strongly influenced by the paradigms of general Sociology, reflecting, to a certain extent, those dominant ideas, SE also influenced and influences Sociology (Afonso, 2009; Beisiegel, 2013; Ferreira, 2006; Haetch, 1994; Leal, 2016; Lingard & Thompson, 2017; Sebasti  o, 2017; Vasconcellos, 2003).

This central importance of SE in the definition of various sociological paradigms considers the greater or lesser

relevance – but that is always ascribed to the socialisation process (Bæck, 2012). Also because of this, it is very difficult to present a precise definition of SE, which makes it more difficult to clearly distinguish it from other specialised sociologies (Bæck, 2012, p. 659). This, without forgetting the critical function of SE that may influence the reading and analysis of other areas of the social, such as social condition, race, gender and globalisation (Bæck, 2012; Dale, 2010; Lauder et al., 2009; Morrow & Torres, 1997; Seabra, 2015).

As argued by Vincent et al. (1994) on the importance of SE,

[...] sociology of education is a general condition of all sociology. It allows not forgetting that social beings have a history, a genesis and that they are not beings of anonymous interactions, without a past, etc. Social beings are not “naturally” equipped with interpretative procedures, but by history, by socialisation, and the analysis of socio-historical procedures of interpretation must be one of the objects of sociology (p. 38).

## 2.2 Understanding Educational Phenomena

The specific contribution of SE to the sociological understanding of educational phenomena or others associated with them can be very useful in the sociological training in the most diverse scopes (Flecha, 2011; Gomes, 2014; Haetch, 1994; Leal, 2016; Sandoval, 2016; Seabra, 2015). For example,

The topic of socialisation, of the relationship between attending school and maintaining the social bond, is very current. The criticisms directed at school about its ability to provide young people with skills used in the labour market, about the disregard of the universal value of the knowledge transmitted and about its ability to guarantee the possibilities of social mobility reveal [...] the importance ascribed to this institution (Vasconcellos, 2003, p. 568).

SE, as a specialisation of Sociology as science, has identity specificities of Sociology, some of which can be translated into the following four principles set out in Ferreira and Serpa (2017): the need to permanently use sociological imagination when seeking to seize the social; assume its multi-paradigmatic nature; be receptive to a heuristic inter-disciplinarity; and foster reflexivity. These four principles should be applied in the sociological understanding of educational phenomena, explaining them through social factors (Bæck, 2012; Boarini, 2014; Enguita, 2010; Sandoval, 2016) with critical self-reflection of sociological and educational practice and research (Lima, 2008; Martins, 2012), for which SE may be central (Lauder et al., 2009).

The SE study problems themselves undergo reformulations over time (Ferreira, 2006). Using Costa's (1992) words and applying his argumentative logic of Sociology to SE, it studies and is part of society and its results are integrated into the educational phenomena themselves, which leads to the permanent (re)formulation of the objects that can be studied by SE.

## 2.3 Sociology of Education and Educational Sciences

Finally, SE's potential for the development of Educational Sciences in the understanding of educational phenomena in their broadest and most varied sense seems to be relevant both for education and training professionals, and for various audiences to deepen their educational and pedagogical intentionality, notwithstanding the epistemological, methodological and body-of-knowledge differences (Boarini, 2014; Flecha, 2011; Silva & Alves, 2015; Szukala, 2012).

However, in the relationship between the Sociological and the Educational Sciences communities, we must bear in mind that these are communities that have differences, insofar that

[...] In Portugal, as in other countries, the development of Sociology of Education has taken place since its beginning, in two institutional contexts: the one of Educational Sciences (closely linked to the training of teachers and other educators) and the one of Sociology (corresponding to the training centred in this scientific area aimed at the training of sociologists) (Silva & Alves, 2015, p. 18).

This diversity can potentially result in latent tensions between SE integrated into the Portuguese Sociological Association and SE constitutive of the Portuguese Society of Educational Sciences, which does not preclude the existence of a shared matrix (Abrantes, 2004, 2010).

In this process of deepening of a fruitful dialogue on the study of various educational objects, it is important to understand that the relationship between SE and Educational Sciences is indeed very important (Afonso, 2009; Nóvoa, 1995; Silva & Alves, 2015). Yet, for this relationship to be sufficiently explored, other dimensions of its object must continue to be deepened and developed beyond school and the phenomena directly linked to it (Loureiro, 2012; Seabra, 2015), in a close articulation between Educational Sciences whenever this enhances its heuristic ability to apprehend the object (Boarini, 2014).

### 3. Conclusion

The previous reflection allows concluding the relevance of SE, materialised, at least, in the following potentialities: its importance in the definition of several sociological paradigms considering the (greater or lesser) relevance ascribed to the socialisation process; its specific contribution to the sociological understanding of educational phenomena in the training of future sociologists; and also its potential contribution to the development of Educational Sciences, both in the understanding of educational phenomena in their broadest sense, recognising its limits, and also by talking and participating in the discussions on the object of Educational Sciences themselves.

In order to achieve this ambition, among other factors, it seems crucial that SE continues to deepen its knowledge about other educational dimensions beyond school and the phenomena directly associated with it (Abrantes, 2010; Abrantes & Amândio, 2014; Afonso, 2015; Dionísio, Torres, & Alves, 2017; Loureiro, 2012; Popkewitz, 2013; Seabra, 2015), maintaining dialogue, whenever heuristically relevant, with other scientific areas. This seems to us to be the potential to fulfil the following desideratum: “If a function of sociologists of education is to produce socially useful knowledge, the use of this knowledge in an intervention situation is not less important, thus renewing the analytical ability of the discipline” (Sebastião, 2017, p. 8).

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