

“Don’t mess with my kids”

The former president of Argentina, Mauricio Macri, presented this week a Foundation that bears his name. The institution focuses on education. At the launch, he said that in education, “we hope that everyone can contribute with knowledge and opinions, but the voice of families, who represent the demands and desires of their children, must be the one that sounds the loudest, that is listened to the most attentively, the most respected”.

In this way, he summed up the ideology that the right-wing has been stirring up in Argentina every time education is discussed, an ideology according to which families are the owners of their children. In this way, the political relaunch of Macri put the conflict between school and family at the center of the public debate, and confronted the government’s health policy and teachers’ demand for a safe return to the classroom. However, although this time it is taking place in the context of the discussion on the return to school in the midst of the pandemic, this conflict is not new.

The Santiago Maldonado case

A relevant precedent was set in 2017 regarding the disappearance of the young Santiago Maldonado during the repression of a protest carried out by the Mapuche Pu Lof community in Resistencia de Cushamen, in the Argentine province of Chubut.

The public debate around his disappearance, which mobilized the denunciation of several human rights organizations against the Argentine State for forced disappearance, cover-up and abuse of authority, did not take long to reach the classrooms through two channels: students and teachers. In the latter case, the Confederation of Educational Workers of the Argentine Republic (CTERA) decided to carry out several school

activities to commemorate the International Day of Forced Disappearance of Persons.

As a result of these actions, complaints from parents against the treatment of the subject in the classroom have arisen, exacerbated by the pro-machrist media, which joined the interventions of important National Government officials. This was the case of the Minister of Education of the Nation, Alejandro Finocchiaro, who questioned the initiative of CTERA and invited the families to present their complaints to the management teams or to the Ministry if they considered that the treatment of the subject was "partisan". This initiative is similar to the one that Bolsonaro promoted a year later in Brazil, by the School without a Party Movement, which called on families and students to denounce "doctrinaire" teachers.

In the case of Argentina, many parents, in some cases coinciding with school authorities, considered that the simple allusion to the term "disappeared" had a party bias, even if the lawsuit itself was labeled as "forced disappearance". The truth is that the controversy triggered the authorities' reaction even before the complaints arrived, which is why they began to ask parents if they would allow their children to participate in classroom activities on the subject. In some institutions, they even staged scenes of violence while withdrawing students in the middle of classes. This counter-campaign became popular on social networks with hashtag #ConMisHijosNo, which ended up consolidating parents as guarantors of censorship of the treatment of the subject in the classroom.

School occupations

A few months later, similar situations developed as a result of school occupations in the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires, in which organized students occupied thirty buildings to demonstrate against the reform promoted by the city's educational portfolio.

While the students conditioned the survey to a meeting with the Minister of Education of Buenos Aires, Soledad Acuña, she chose the families as interlocutors: "Parents have to be able to keep their long pants and skirts on to tell the children no".

Thus, the minister called on families to impose their authority and send their children home, ignoring the student body as an interlocutor in the debate over the reform that triggered the occupations. The corollary of this orientation came with the accusation of 43 parents because of their children's school occupations.

Integral Sexual Education

The most recent event in this succession of controversies that have pitted schools and families against each other, and perhaps what most clearly manifests the nature of this tension, was around the treatment of the content of Integral Sexual Education in schools.

The controversy followed the parliamentary debate to legalize voluntary termination of pregnancy in 2018. This occurred in the context of a great social mobilization in which the participation of high school students who wore the green scarf of the Campaign for the Right to Abortion stood out. Against the approval of the law, the movement "in defense of two lives" demonstrated the participation of denominational schools as the organizational center of the mobilization as fundamental.

In the context of parliamentary debate, which ended with the rejection of the law, a consensus seemed to have been established on the importance of Integral Sex Education in schools, both among legislative authorities and public opinion. However, faced with the possibility of advancing in its effective implementation, the movement that calls itself "for two lives" turned to a direct confrontation against the

treatment of the issue in schools, articulating a campaign under the slogan “Don’t mess with my children.” The campaign took the name and colors (light blue and pink) of a movement that emerged in Peru during 2016 in opposition to the public policies of the national government in favor of implementing the gender approach in education and other areas of public administration.

What is behind the conflict?

There is an underlying idea that comes into play whenever families and teachers confront each other: children and youth are the property of their parents.

Although there is always someone who wants to give it up as dead, school as we know it today is a very successful institution in the socialization of education, care, and education of children. The pandemic has made this clear. In a certain sense, it can be said that the school objectively expresses a contradictory tendency for the survival of the traditional family institution. This is so as its expansion implies the growing socialization of the tasks of caring for children and teenagers. However, the family continues to claim for itself – and it seems to be granted in an absolute way – a kind of property right over children and teenagers. When Macri states that education “is a fundamental issue for each family,” he is claiming this right over the right to autonomy of each student.

The right’s demand for the opening of schools and, at the same time, the family’s claim as a privileged space for social reproduction, are presented to us as a contradiction. However, this contradiction is only apparent. The relationship between the socialization of child raising – which accompanies the expansion of capitalist social relations – and the supposed property rights of the family over children is analogous to that between the socialization of production and the private appropriation of wealth in the sphere of capitalist

production. In this sense, the right wing continues to promote the traditional, structurally weakened family as the main space for personal and affective fulfillment, ideologically reinforcing in the same movement the right to property.

Thus, when the school questions the appropriation that families make of children in order to conceive them as autonomous subjects, the families react violently. They are called to the trenches of battle, either against the rebelliousness of the students or against the boldness of the teachers. It seems that what cannot be questioned is the property, and for most families, the only property they have over "their children". Family ownership of the lives of children and youth is part of a more complex fabric that includes other agendas and social oppressions, such as state and male appropriation of women's bodies, heterosexuality, and mandatory motherhood. The ideology of right-wing think tanks in the region operates on this reality, stirring up the spirit of families each time school becomes a space open to social criticism.

If we want to discuss these ideas, then we must be willing to discuss the apparent communion between family and school. It is up to us teachers to do so if we want to treat our students like people.

As teachers, we have a fundamental role to play in defending public education as a privileged space for understanding and also to undermine the foundations of these forms of domination. We must take sides in this tension and articulate ourselves with those movements that sustain the tendencies towards subject autonomy, especially that of our young students.

If gathering in schools is fundamental, it is not because families have the right to decide what their children should or should not do, but because in schools, often against the private interest of families, a fundamental battle for freedom

and autonomy is being fought.