

## ULYSSES IN THE SCHOOL: THINKING OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP ON THE BASIS OF THE MYTH OF ACHILLES

*This story is a starting point for re-thinking "leadership" and "educational action", pillars of an action programme that aims to wholly understand education in disadvantaged contexts.*

### THE MYTH'S VALUE FOR ANTHROPOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE

The relationship between mythology and philosophy is ancient. Plato begins one of the foundational books on political philosophy with theoretical language, but with the narration of a situation and an encounter. The Republic, like other Platonic texts, constantly refers to stories and myths.

Indeed, the stories or certain archetypes reflect nuances in human events that are either transmitted by word-of-mouth or are part of stories from fiction or from the heritage of peoples who, in any event, express truths in action, truths regarding sense and, accordingly, can continue being interpreted in terms of current culture, because they reflect something essential that otherwise difficult to observe. They do not transmit a material truth, but they can transmit another type of truth, impossible to tell appropriately from outside a narration.

### THETIS AND ACHILLES, THE GYNAECEUM AND TROY: A SHORT NOTE REGARDING THE FAMILY-SCHOOL RELATIONSHIP

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Achilles is taken by his mother, Thetis, to the Island of Skyros to remain hidden from Ulysses' sight. In the gynaecium, among women and disguised as a woman, he lives unaware of the Trojan War, which is his destiny. Troy exemplifies the great Greek epic poem and the paradigm of duty to the community. The myth is read by Gomá (2007) as a model of human development, that transitions from the aesthetic stage, characteristic of childhood and adolescence, focusing on a self without obligations, with all possibilities open, but without being specific, to the ethical stage that characterizes adult life.

The first aspect we can highlight in the myth is the role of Thetis, Achilles' mother. She is presented as an interesting archetype of parent-child relationships marked by love and by the key role of father and mother in their children's education. This is a crucial matter, because the attitude to school itself will depend on the parents' expectations and behaviour towards it, on how they understand it and, especially, of their role in it, of the family structure itself, of the kind of pressures the family is subject to, especially in disadvantaged environments. If Achilles knew the protective role of Thetis, today's school should know its particular "Thetis" to act in consequence and to re-interpret, in the current social, cultural and family setting, the sense of what is mostly accepted to be the key importance of the father and the mother in the education of children.

Without recognizing the complexity of these affective and emotional ties of origin, it is difficult for educational institutions to approach a correct relationship by claiming their own space that parents must know and respect. No space can by itself offer whole child development and both must respect their essential differences, spaces and times. Nevertheless, the danger of a



leadership that is based on a whole child concept of education is to not recognise the limitations and opportunities that its particular position offers. To continue with the metaphor, Ulysses is not Thetis and he has goals and roles that differ from Thetis'. Seeking whole child development demands recognition that a student develops as much in educational institutions, as in many other spaces.

### ULYSSES HAS A GOAL AND TAKES DECISIONS

Ulysses is a hero for the Greeks, someone who fully demonstrates a series of virtues exalted by the community. He is a person standing at a certain crossroads where, in his decisions and in his actions, overcomes the difficulties he has to face in his search for justice. He is an archetype of what we can eventually become.

The main pillar that structures the debate is as follows: faced with a bureaucratic leadership whose main function is to give out orders on a daily basis, stands one whose aim is to guide and create intentions to commit them to a common task, which solves day-to-day needs, and, at the same time, distributes responsibilities. None of this has to do with a "liquid" or "horizontal" interpretation of leadership that does not assume the consequences of decisions or which dilutes them in an atmosphere of anonymous or uncertain responsibility.

### ULYSSES DESIGNED A STRATEGY

Dragging Achilles to Troy was not an easy task, because apart from his obvious immaturity, his environment played against Ulysses' plans. Hidden and disguised as a woman, he was unrecognisable. King Lycomedes did not help. He denied that he was there and gave permission to the Achaeans to look for him unsuccessfully. It was then when Ulysses designed a strategy and travelled to Skyros disguised as a merchant.

Can we design a course in educational leadership without considering the purposes of education? Their real problems? Can we skip that step if we want to do something really valuable? Should we not include space for reflection on what we want and how we want to achieve it?

### ULYSSES UTILIZES METHODS

How to recognise one among many? How to get their attention to recognise them or, once recognised, how to attract them? Let us not forget that Ulysses arrives in Skyros in disguise and presents himself to the gynaecium with gifts for women. Among them, he has placed a shield and a spear. He orders the trumpet to sound and Achilles, believing the enemy has arrived and in view of the weapons, is discovered. This interesting episode invites us to think of some resources for educational leadership.

First, it requires a mechanism of approach that is not taken for granted and a series of instruments to facilitate such an approach. In the case of educational centres, these weapons are

the subjects that are taught. Teachers are educating through the different subjects. That is what the occupation of educating consists of in school institutions.

Leadership for whole child development, as always, involves improving the teaching staff's actions, by associating it with the school's goals, giving prestige to their educational work and not necessarily overloading that work with other seemingly important tasks, but which are, ultimately, superfluous. The teachers' tools are their subject and their ability to connect with students.

### THE TROJAN WAR: A DESTINY FOR ULYSSES

There is no educational adventure, there is no need to remove students from anywhere if it is not to take them somewhere else. Considering education on the basis of the myth we explore is to think of the school institution's goals and especially of its public purposes.

Educational leadership specific to the school is aimed at developing the self, with the purpose of taking part in the public space. The school is understood to be within the domain of education for citizenship. A quote by Meirieu in this respect: "School is an institution where relationships among people, daily administration as a whole and the entire material environment come together. From an etymological point of view, they breathe as one" to create a particular form of human activity based on specific values: recognition of otherness, the demand for precision, rigor and truth. The combined learning of constructing the common good and the capacity to think for oneself" (Meirieu, 2006:95). Achieving all this depends on the concept of person we base this on and on how none of what constitutes them lies outside an education we understand as whole child.

